

Birla Central Library

PILANI (Jaipur State)

Class No :- 944.04

Book No :- M 84 g.

Accession No :- 28674.

*This book has been
graciously presented by*

Seth G. D. Birla

THE GASCON

THE GASCON

*A Story of the
French Revolution*

BY

J. B. MORTON

LONDON

MACMILLAN & CO. LTD

1946

COPYRIGHT

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH**

TO THE MEMORY
OF
CAPTAIN PETER BELLOC
ROYAL MARINES

CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>Prologue</i>	I
CHAPTER	
I. <i>Armand Birros sets out on a Journey, and draws his Sword</i>	7
II. <i>Birros follows a Carriage</i>	19
III. <i>A Conversation between Two Noblemen</i>	30
IV. <i>The Quarrel</i>	41
V. <i>The Duel</i>	52
VI. <i>The Flight</i>	67
VII. <i>Citizen Chassaviel has the Last Word</i>	76
VIII. <i>Aux Armes Citoyens !</i>	84
IX. <i>The New Song</i>	94
X. <i>The Mob storms the Tuileries</i>	105
XI. <i>Birros changes Sides, and sees the Fall of the Monarchy</i>	117
XII. <i>What occurred at the Prison of La Force</i>	126
XIII. <i>Félicien goes to hear Saint-Just in the Convention</i>	140
XIV. <i>Birros prowls on a Roof, meets a Lady, and becomes her Brother</i>	145
XV. <i>The Pursuit</i>	156
XVI. <i>Félicien and Gabrielle</i>	167
XVII. <i>Birros in Prison</i>	171

THE GASCON

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII. <i>Birros escapes, and Chélidoine becomes a Widow</i>	184
XIX. <i>The Queen's Last Hope</i>	196
XX. <i>Félicien fights at Wattignies, and again hears the Song</i>	205
XXI. <i>Lovers' Meeting</i>	217

PROLOGUE

WHILE on a visit to the home of French friends in Dreux some years ago, I grew weary of recurring debates about modern art, which was the only enthusiasm of my host and hostess. So I went to Paris for a day, taking with me their elderly aunt, who was a more amusing companion. We lunched slowly and admirably at the Relais de la Belle Aurore, near the Opera, and then walked idly about the streets, talking of this, that and the other. After a while we found ourselves in the Temple quarter, among the shouting dealers in second-hand clothes. We turned into a quiet and sombre street, in which the traffic and the people seemed to have been forgotten. There was no surprise in finding a museum in such a street, but what attracted us and induced us to go in was a notice at the side of the entrance, saying that this was the Musée Girouard, founded in the year 1807, and giving the name of the present curator as Étienne Girouard. We came into a cool, dark, echoing hall, where an old man in a frock-coat asked for four francs. He was a shrunken old man, with a very white face, and dim eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses. His manner was deferent, but full of dignity. He walked with us to the double doors of a large room, in which were half a dozen other visitors, bowed us in, and left us.

We found ourselves, Mme. de Saint-Sévérac and I, in a high-ceilinged room with tall windows. It was furnished with chairs and tables and ornaments of the revolutionary period. Figures, dressed in the appropriate costumes, sat or stood about the room, and I felt that momentary shock which all feel who come unexpectedly among wax models. Moreover, the figures had been arranged by the hand of an artist, so that I seemed to be looking at a scene on a stage. Each figure appeared to be a character in some

THE GASCON

drama. The impression strengthened as we moved from one group to another. My companion said, "This is most remarkable, yet I have never heard anyone speak of this museum."

We were in front of a group of three ladies, who had the air of posing for their portraits. The artist might have surprised them at their talk, asking them to look towards him while he made a rough sketch for some future picture. So well had the modeller done his work that you could swear the three had but that moment glanced in our direction as we approached them, and would continue their conversation when we had passed by. A card by the side of this group said : "A Noblewoman and her Nieces". The elderly lady was perhaps in the middle fifties. Her face was handsome and animated, and the exquisite little hand that held her fan drew the eye more than the jewels on her fingers. She wore a vast wig, dressed high on her head, and it was evident that she had been talking to the girl who sat on a stool at her knees. This girl was all grace and youth, with a face so pretty that one did not look for character in it. Her lips were parted in a smile, and one hand — as dainty as the hand of the older lady — was raised in some slight gesture of dissent. She had abundant golden hair, superb shoulders and a neck for poets to describe. It was a face which plain women would have called self-willed, flighty, frivolous — and they would have been right. Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, who was by no means plain, said, "A baggage". Facing this girl, on the other side of the elderly lady, was her sister. And here were beauty and character. Beneath a cloud of dark hair, a face grave beyond its years looked steadfastly into some distant world. There was repose in the tranquil eyes, but in the very poise of the head a hint of unhappiness. "What a marvellous face!" I exclaimed. "I should have thought a man would prefer the sister," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac. "A very young man, perhaps," I replied, "or

PROLOGUE

a very foolish one. But look at this rascal."

Close to the group stood a villainous figure; a tall young man in untidy clothes, who was brandishing a pistol, and staring at the ladies. He had lank, fair hair, uncombed, and a lean face. His ugly lips were curled in a melodramatic smile.

"He's like something out of a historical novel," I said. "The wicked official who drags the high-born ladies to the guillotine. I'm sure he must have existed. The card says 'A Revolutionary Leader'. I wonder who he was."

"I have no doubt about his existence," said my companion. "There were many like him."

"But I wonder what the point of this museum is. I mean, if they were real people, why not say so, and give their names?"

"We will ask the old man later. What is this one? Ah! 'A Marquis.' Not bad."

Before us was a very old gentleman with a remarkably young face, and a body still erect and slim. He was in Court dress, and held his head proudly and disdainfully. His left hand rested lightly on the hilt of his sword. His right hand was almost hidden in the lace at his wrist.

"The uncompromising type," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac. "He probably died in the attack on the Tuileries in '92."

"Or an émigré?"

"Oh, no. His sort died at their post. They didn't emigrate."

His neighbour was a vain young fop, with some resemblance to the fair girl in the first group. He had a lace handkerchief in his hand. But there was a seriousness, a purpose in his face which belied his apparent effeminacy.

"Versailles," said I. "The card calls him a young nobleman. And here's another 'Revolutionary'."

A mop of brown hair. A pitiless, mean face. Stooping

THE GASCON

shoulders. The rags that half-clothed him belonged to the hours of insurrection, and his place was among the oppressed and the inflamed who followed Maillard or Théroigne de Méricourt, and perished in a pool of drink and blood.

"And here," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, "is a really naughty lady. Now I like the look of her. 'Parisian Woman', says the card. What do you think of this one?"

The woman was sitting with her elbows on a small table. Her hands were clasped under her chin, and her direct glance was a gay challenge. She was dressed neatly and with taste.

"A dark-eyed adventuress," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, "but there's nothing scheming or small-minded about her. Whatever she did, good or bad, she did for the sheer fun of the thing. Don't you find her attractive?"

"Exceedingly," said I, "and I think she should be introduced to her neighbour. She would do him good."

The figure to which I referred might have been labelled "Gloomy Nobleman". He was a handsome, soldierly young man, but his sombre face was the face of a student, a scholar, and a damnably unhappy one at that. His sword, and the lace at his wrists and throat, seemed as out of place as the gold brooch fastened at the side of his broad-brimmed blue hat. Yet you could see him, when you considered him more closely, either in the library or on horseback.

"He might have been the brother of the dark girl in the first group," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac.

An "Official of the Revolutionary Tribunal" surprised us both. There was nothing bloodthirsty in his appearance. In fact he looked like a dishonest provincial notary. A dull, pedantic, pompous, dry little man.

"I think I've had enough of this," said my companion. "There's not enough variety."

"Right. But before we go I want to have a word with the curator. It's the queerest museum I was ever in. There's so little to see, for one thing. And then, you feel somehow

PROLOGUE

that the lives of these people might have been connected in some way. It's what occurred to me at first — that the whole thing is arranged like a scene on the stage."

"I expect it's really accidental," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac. "You're inclined to be too imaginative, you know, as Liane always tells you. We stolid, phlegmatic French people cannot keep up with you volatile English."

We were walking towards the door when I caught sight of the masterpiece of the museum. It was the figure of a swordsman ; tall, broad-shouldered, arrogant. The hands were on the hips, the legs were thrust apart, and he was laughing with his head tilted back. The face was ugly, honest, good-natured. His hair was red, and his magnificent moustache was red. He had an absurd snub nose. Looking at him, I could hear his strange oaths, and see him fighting on a staircase, and kissing every pretty girl in sight.

"The perfect mate for the naughty lady," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac. "What does the card call him ?"

"'A Béarnais'," I read out. "But I think," I went on, "that we must give him a name. Gilles de Something. . . . Gaston . . . Raoul. . . ."

"We have been most interested, Monsieur," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac to the curator. "I am surprised that your museum is not better known."

"We are rather hidden away here, Madame, and we do not do enough business to advertise ourselves."

"I thought that nowadays advertisement came first and business afterwards," I said.

"Such adventures are not for the small family business," he answered.

"And who was this Girouard ?" asked Mme. de Saint-Sévérac.

"Jean Girouard," said the old man, "was my great-grandfather. He lived in Paris during the Revolution, and

THE GASCON

made many sketches and wax models of men and women he met. Some of them were destroyed, but others were exhibited by my grandfather. My great-grandfather lived on the left bank, and did all his work in a small room near the river. My grandfather moved to this house, and my father carried on the business. There are other rooms which you have not seen, but perhaps you are pressed for time. I am glad that you have been interested, Madame."

"Immensely," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, not very convincingly.

"Are none of the names of the originals known?" I asked.

"My grandfather put no names to the figures," replied the old man. "I imagine that my great-grandfather had his reasons for keeping his figures anonymous. Do you ask for any special reason, Monsieur?"

"Yes. It seemed to me that these were not simply a collection of individuals, but that there might be some story behind their lives. I mean that they were actors in the same story, and all knew each other."

Mme. de Saint-Sévérac smiled broadly. So did M. Girouard.

"Doubtless, Monsieur," he said, "there are many stories, lost now, alas! But that the lives of these people were connected in any way, there is no reason to suppose. The tradition in our family is that they were all real people. But I imagine that they were figures chosen by chance. One could, of course, invent romances, and people would flock to the museum. But it is better as it is. I find it more satisfactory that these people you have seen should keep their secrets, if they had any secrets. It is sufficiently remarkable, surely, that they should live on in wax."

"Now are you satisfied?" asked Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, who was beginning to paw the ground with her right foot, a sign of impatience which one did well to heed.

"I must be satisfied," I said. "But it's extraordinary,

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

Monsieur, that there should be no legend, as it were, about any of these people in your family."

The old man snapped his fingers with a boyish gesture. "I was forgetting," he said. "My father told me no romantic tales of the ladies you have seen, but there was one thing he told me, and you will not find it very exciting."

"Pray tell him, Monsieur," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, "or he will not sleep for a week."

"The name of the Béarnais," said M. Girouard, "was Birros. Armand Birros."

We thanked him and went out into the street.

"You are very silent," said Mme. de Saint-Sévérac, when we had walked about two hundred yards.

"I was wondering," I said. "Doesn't the name suit him? I was wondering what he was really like, this Armand Birros."

CHAPTER ONE

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY AND DRAWS HIS SWORD

ARMAND BIRROS rode slowly down the valley of the Aspe towards the plains. It was early morning in the month of February, in the year 1790. A chill wind blew from the Pyrenean snows, and beside him the river, the Gave d'Aspe, was whipped into wavelets. At a turn of the road he reined in his great black horse and looked back at his home, a sturdy grey stone house on an eminence above the village of Escot. All that he saw had been familiar to him as long as he could remember; since that first day when he had gone hunting with his father in the forest of Bager. There was not a mule-track to the Spanish frontier which he did not know. He knew the ways of the birds and the fish and

THE GASCON

the bears and the izards ; he loved the people and their songs and their tales. He might have passed his life in his own valley, and died there like his ancestors, but in his twenty-third year the stir of new things reached even to his remote home, and adventure called him.

He was red-haired and red of face, strongly built, and like all Béarnais, of an independent spirit. But the thing that everybody noticed in him was his gaiety. That and his love of fighting had made him famous already throughout his valley. And as he now rode northwards, sitting his horse with a Gascon swagger, there was always someone to speed him on his way with a word of affection. In Lurbe a little girl shyly approached him and offered him a small bough of evergreen which she had plucked in the forest. It was the only present she could think of, and she was rewarded by being lifted on to the back of the horse and allowed to pull his ears and examine the bulging saddle-bags. At Asasp the valley broadened. It was like coming through high gates into a world of wider horizons, and in boyhood Birros had regarded everything as far as this village as home, the home-land. A man leaned from a window here and saluted him, and two woodcutters on their way to work exchanged ribald jests with him. In Arros there was quite a gathering of villagers, on the outskirts of which a pretty girl stood with tears in her eyes. In Gurmençon he had to stop and drink wine with the innkeeper, and in Bidos the blacksmith and his wife pulled him from his horse, and set him down to a meal they had prepared for him. For it was known all the way down the valley that on this day Armand Birros was setting out to see the world. As he rode into Oloron the wintry sun came out from behind the clouds, and shone on the waters of the Ossau, the river of the neighbouring valley, and he began to sing, going at his leisure, and pleased with everything he saw.

So rode Armand Birros on his strong horse, Houloubourrade. His saddle-bags were full, his clothes new. In

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

his purse was a heap of gold pieces, in his holsters two pistols, the gifts of his father. The gallant blue feather in his hat had been set there by his mother, his sister had made his sword-knot. His skill with the sword he got from Navarrot of Orthez, from the Chevalier de Cardesse his taste in oaths, from the good stock of Béarn his healthy body ; but his merry heart from Almighty God.

Following the great bend of the road between the hills he went by Pau, and so northwards to Agen, and through the country of the Dordogne to Périgueux, and from Périgueux through the Limousin, sleeping in such hostelrys as he found, and travelling onwards in all weathers. And one evening in the drizzling dusk he crossed the darkening Cher and came clattering into Vierzon. Here he found a squat inn which he would have spurned, but for something unusual in its appearance ; a conspiratorial air suggested by a dim light burning in an upper room, and emphasized by the presence of several surly youths who skulked at the entrance. He shouted for the landlord, but nobody replied, and had it not been for the sign swinging over the door, he would have doubted whether it were indeed an inn. He called again, and again receiving no reply, he said to one of the youths : " Where are the stables ? " The lout jerked his thumb, and Birros rode in the direction indicated. There was no other animal in the stables, and he led his horse to a stall, unsaddled it, rubbed it down, and put a plentiful supply of oats in the manger. He then carried his saddle-bags across the yard, and found his path blocked by a large fat man with cropped grey hair, who stood with folded arms, contemplating him by the light of a dusty lantern above the door. This man uttered no sound until it was clear that Birros was going to walk straight at him and over him. Then he put out his hand and snapped, " Where do you think you are going ? "

" Into the inn," said Birros, with a smile.

" And what were you doing in my stable ? "

THE GASCON

"Stabling my horse, and feeding it," said Birros affably, and made to push past.

"One moment," said the man, "I am the landlord here, not you."

"Then, why the devil didn't you come when I called you?"

"There's no room here for you."

"Then you shall get me a meal, and I will ride on."

"I am full up, I tell you."

Birros put back his head and laughed. "I suppose," he said, "the King and Queen are paying you a visit."

Putting the man aside, Birros strode into the main room of the inn, which was empty.

"I think you can manage to squeeze me in," he said, and set down his bags beside him in front of a meagre fire. The landlord hovered near him, still surly but no longer hectoring.

"I cannot put you out by force," he said.

"Of course you can't," Birros replied in the tone in which one soothes a petulant child. "But why should you want to? I am a traveller, like any other."

So disarming was his manner that the landlord became apologetic. "There are men coming here presently," he said. "It is a meeting, you understand. They don't like to be disturbed."

"They can meet all night for all I care," said Birros. "I want food and wine and a bed."

The landlord was about to reply, when both he and Birros became aware that someone was standing in the doorway. It was a raw-boned woman, with her sleeves tucked up, and looking as sullen as her husband.

"Have I grown horns and hoofs?" asked Birros. "What is so odd about me?"

"From whom do you come? Who sent you here?" asked the woman.

"Nobody, dear lady. I dropped from the skies."

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

"But you have never been here before. Have you come to the meeting?"

"Certainly I have, my love."

The effect of this simple lie on the landlord was magical. Though his face was not capable of a transformation to anything pleasant, his manner became more like that of a landlord towards a guest.

"Had you but said this before," he mumbled.

"Matthieu," said the woman, "take him to a room, while I prepare a meal. He will have to eat quickly, as they will soon arrive and the meeting will begin."

The landlord carried the saddle-bags to a room on a creaking landing, and left Birros to himself. As he glanced round the room and felt the bed, he wondered what the meeting would turn out to be. No doubt this hostel was the headquarters of a local branch of one of the revolutionary clubs that were springing up all over France at this moment. He was by no means disinclined to hear what the members had to say, since he had an open mind on most of the great debates of the day.

When he came downstairs again the room was still empty, but there were chairs drawn up at a long table in the centre, and lighted candles were placed on it. Birros found his supper on a small table in a corner. He fell to with appetite, and found the wine of Sancerre to his liking. The landlord's wife, twisting her poor face into what she thought was a smile, informed him that "they" would be here soon. And it was not long before voices and footsteps were heard outside, and three men came into the room noisily. The landlord and his wife stood deferentially by the long table. The woman curtsied, and said "Good evening, M. le Vicomte." The nobleman thus addressed waved his hand in the air at her, as though brushing away a midge, and shouted with unnecessary vigour, "Where are the others?" Immediately the two men with him fawned and grinned, and one answered in

THE GASCON

an oily tone, "They will not be long now, my lord." The speaker looked like a prosperous shopkeeper from any small town. His companion might have been an usher. They were both half crazed at the honour of being in the nobleman's presence, and at the same time sick with fear of incurring his displeasure. The Vicomte himself was a vapid man of perhaps thirty, who clearly enjoyed his prestige. His dress was poor, and he looked the kind of younger son who had gambled himself out of his world and into any adventure that offered. More men came in, including two of the taciturn youths who had been skulking outside the inn when Birros arrived. Some sat down at the table, others turned towards the stairs up which Birros had gone to his room, for a slow and stately step was heard. A mild-looking, plainly dressed man pushed open the door at the foot of the stairs and came in. He was about fifty years of age, and could have been nothing but a country lawyer. He had a rosy round face, and a hesitant manner. But evidently even the Vicomte recognized his authority there.

"Good evening, M. Brouvéhil," said several voices.

And M. Brouvéhil made no reply, but stood still and stared at Birros, who was shovelling food into his mouth, away in his corner. The landlord and his wife had been about to withdraw, but they stopped and smiled towards Birros.

"Who is this?" asked M. Brouvéhil, in a precise voice.

"Why, a new one for the meeting," said Matthieu.

Brouvéhil exchanged a look with the nobleman. The others turned from the table to examine Birros, who went on eating and drinking. There were murmurs and whispers.

"Do any of you know this gentleman?" asked Brouvéhil.

"Never set eyes on him," shouted the nobleman.

"He said he had come for the meeting," cried Matthieu.

"Yes. That's right. He said that," said his wife.

The nobleman, with all eyes on him, stepped up to the small table and addressed Birros as though he were re-

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

buking a dog. "My name," he said, "is M. de Romorantin. Perhaps you will explain?"

Birros sat back and looked at his questioner in a most good-humoured fashion. "What a coincidence!" he said. "My name is Armand Birros. Explain what?"

"Why you are here. And why you pretended that you had come to attend our meeting."

"I am here because it suits me to be here. This is an inn, I take it, and I am a traveller. I am not accountable to you or your friends for my choice of a night's lodging."

"But you told the landlord——"

"I am coming to that. There seemed to be only one way of getting a meal and a bed. I took that way."

Birros was behaving so reasonably that his questioner began to feel foolish. What is more, he knew that he was not showing up well. He wanted to order the intruder to leave, but Birros did not look the kind of man one orders about, even when he was smiling innocently. To cut a figure, to save his precious dignity, the foolish de Romorantin assumed an attitude of insolent power.

"I do not like your tone, sir," he said with empty truculence.

"I am desolated," said Birros, and laughed loudly.

"You are an intruder here, and——"

"And you, M. de Thingamegig, are an intruder *here*," said Birros, pointing to his plate. "I am not interfering with your meeting. Have the kindness, M. de Thingamebob, not to interfere with my supper."

One or two laughed. M. de Romorantin stooped, picked up a glass of wine and was about to throw it in the traveller's face. But he was not quite quick enough. Birros caught his arm, and threw him back, so that he fell to the floor.

"Ventreguienne!" roared Birros. "If you had told me, M. de Whatyoumaycallit, that you wanted a fight, you could have had it long ago."

THE GASCON

By the time the nobleman, who had never wanted a fight in his life, was on his feet and had drawn his sword, Birros had his back to the door which led to the staircase. None of those in the room was armed, but it was well to guard against a massed rush, and the staircase was narrow enough to be defended with ease by a competent swordsman. While he was dealing with the furious but by no means dangerous attack of his antagonist, he saw the landlord leading some of the men out by another door, and he heard a voice shout, "Up the other staircase, and we catch him in the rear." At the same moment he remembered that his saddle-bags and pistols were in his bedroom. He grinned suddenly at the idea that came into his head. Before they roused the town he must be clear of the inn. The saddle-bags and pistols must go. By pretending to be outfought by his opponent, by giving ground, as though pressed inexorably up the stairs, he would draw the rest of the men away from the room to the back staircase. He began to put his plan into action. He went up one step, and another, and another. But only a few of the men ran from the room. One or two came behind the nobleman, cheering him on. Birros decided that he must make a dash for it before it was too late. He shortened his sword, as though about to lunge clumsily. The nobleman thrust at him, and overbalanced, as Birros side-stepped. He hurled one of the men on the stairs against the other, and leaped down into the room. Unarmed men, and peaceful civilians at that, do not dispute the passage of a man with a whirling sword. He dashed across the room and out of the door, but as he came in sight of the stables he pulled up short. Astride a small window beside the back entrance, with the light from the lantern falling on his hastily donned hat, was the rosy-faced lawyer. He was lowering two saddle-bags to the ground. Under his right arm were two pistols. Over his shoulder was a cloak. Birros pressed himself against the wall, and watched the man of law, even more hesitant

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

than usual, lower himself to the ground. Then Birros tiptoed up behind him and pricked him with his sword. The poor man let out a yell and dropped the pistols and the bags. Birros took the cloak from his shoulders as gently as a lover removing an opera-cloak from his lady's. "Thank you for bringing me my belongings," said Birros. Then he picked up the rosy rascal and carried him, kicking and protesting, towards a succulent heap of manure, and threw him into it. As he approached the stables to saddle his horse, M. de Romorantin, followed by several men armed with chair-legs and broomsticks, came running across the yard. They checked when they saw the pistols. Birros picked out a particularly repulsive ostler in the front rank.

"Come, you," he shouted, "and get my horse saddled up."

The youth shuffled forward.

"It is useless," said de Romorantin. "The whole countryside will be roused before you can get away."

"You may speak when spoken to," said Birros, and backed into the stable.

Several of his assailants drifted away, and Birros guessed that they were waiting for the arrival of armed men. However, the ostler worked quickly, helped on by a graphic description of what would happen to him if he delayed, and Birros, with his saddle-bags in position, and one pistol still covering the crowd, turned his horse's head to the entrance and set spurs to the weary animal. He was only just in time. As he galloped under the archway into the street, he saw, a hundred yards away to his left, torches, and a moving crowd. He wheeled to the right, and was soon thundering through the night down the Orleans road. When he had allowed his tired horse to fall into an easy canter, he looked back over his shoulder. But there was no sign of pursuit. He leaned over, and patted his horse's head and pulled his ears. "Houloubourrade, old friend," he said, "it looks as if we shall sleep rough to-night."

It was possible to see, by the fitful moonlight, a country-

THE GASCON

side of innumerable small pools and streamlets, stretching on either side of the road, giving promise of little but marshy ground. Beyond La Motte-Beuvron, however, a lane led to a small wood, and Birros made for this. In a grassy glade he tethered his horse, giving him plenty of space, and himself lay down under a tree, wrapped round in his cloak. It was not long before he slept. At some time in the night the cold, or the sound of his horse cropping grass, awakened him. The wind had dropped, and the moonlight was falling through the bare branches. The stars were shining in an unclouded sky, and Birros lay on his back, gazing up at them, and asking himself, as does every man of sensibility who sets out in search of adventure, why he had left his home. His own valley suddenly became very dear to him, as he thought of the good people who were his friends. And there ran in his mind particularly a song of the Spanish herdsmen in the high pastures, a song in which a wise old man warns the youngsters against the ambition to "better" themselves, against the fever of travel, against the dancing marsh lights which lead a man out of his own valley. The song said: The priest told me that I would be a fool to leave my home. He said it was a fine thing to be born by the Gallego, to live and die within sound of it; the noble Gallego which makes such an uproar coming down out of the mountains. But I knew better than the priest, for I had heard of a place where a man might own a million olive trees, and live at his ease, with no more work to do. I have wandered up and down the world, I have been to Ronda and Almeria, but I never had a glimpse of that place. The voice of the Gallego, coming down out of the mountains, is a mournful voice, but I shall die unhappy unless I die by its waters. "One day," thought Birros, "I shall return with a wife, and settle down in my home. But there is much to be seen and done before that. And meanwhile, there is sleep." And he turned over on his side, cursed the cold, and fell asleep again.

ARMAND BIRROS SETS OUT ON A JOURNEY

Stuffed with grass, Houloubourrade presently followed his master's example.

Birros rode across the Loire into Orleans with the appetite of a hunter. He satisfied it at the tavern of the Beautiful Headless Lady. The innkeeper was a solid, sensible man who conceived that his business was to run his inn for the pleasure of his customers, and not to pay too much attention to politics, which were somebody else's job. Every man to his trade. This kind of attitude suited Birros very well, for he had never taken politics very seriously, and had a profound faith in the ability of the ordinary man, by good-humour and a certain amount of care, to save the world from becoming too seriously involved in the tortuous schemes of its rulers.

"Devil take me," said the innkeeper (for Birros was of those whom all honest men treat as fellow men), "Devil take me if I can make head or tail of it all."

"Nor I," said Birros.

"Now here in Orleans they read the *Moniteur* when it comes from Paris, and they argue and hold meetings, and last week the National Guard arrest a man who smashes a window in the church of St. Euverte, crying that the priests are worse than the noblemen. And up jumps the Mayor, and says that the National Guard are worse than the priests, and a disgrace to France. Then all the wives of the shopkeepers in the National Guard march to the Town Hall, demanding the resignation of their husbands from a body which persecutes the Church of God. And a group of noblemen supports the wives of the shopkeepers, and another group of noblemen supports the National Guard, and half the municipal officials vow they will never go to Mass again if the criminal is not punished, and the other half threaten to resign if he is punished. Nobody knows how it would all have ended if a new trouble hadn't given them something else to talk about. Out at Salbris

THE GASCON

the peasants burnt a castle, because they said the owner was hoarding wheat in his barns. And they got drunk in the cellars, and burned the barns, wheat and all. And the owner shot six of them from behind a cart, and the people of the Sologne villages got together and burnt another castle to avenge the death of the six men. What next ? Why, as you may guess, a young nobleman, with perfect logic, put a ball through the leg of the curé of Ennordres, saying loudly that the priests were responsible for the lack of food. And so it goes on. And then, yesterday it is discovered that the man who smashed the church window to punish the priests was a poor half-wit from Marcilly, who'd broken out of his father's house, had been recaptured and brought back by the curé, and had broken out a second time. What do you make of it all ? ”

“ I take it as I find it,” said Birros. “ Once begin to take those who rule us seriously, and you will break your heart and go mad. I suppose we must be ruled by somebody, but I often wonder whether it matters much to the fellow who isn't interested in politics, who rules him. I suppose it does, or there wouldn't be such disturbances everywhere.” Birros then told the innkeeper what had happened at Vierzon.

“ Nothing of this surprises me,” said the innkeeper.

“ I suppose this town, too, is full of clubs and meetings ? ” asked Birros.

“ Full of them,” said the innkeeper. “ There's the Club of Bacchus or Brutus or whatever it is, and the Club of the Forty, and the Friends of the Revolution, and the Circle of Ly — Lycurgus and the Friends of Liberty, and the devil knows what.”

“ Have you been to any of them ? ”

“ Once or twice. It doesn't matter which you go to. There is so much noise, with everybody anxious to make an impression, that it is impossible to decide what it is they are for or against. My opinion is that it is high time

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

the King clapped his hat on to his head and came out into the country to have a look at things for himself. He's the one to stop all the trouble, and it is a pity he ever let all these big mouths go on so long."

"Hum," said Birros, "I will think about it all as I go on my way. Why don't you start a Club of your own, just to muddle them up?"

"I have other things to think about," said the innkeeper.

Birros mounted his horse, and left the town by the Etampes road.

CHAPTER TWO

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

ARMAND's family had all the respect of provincials for the capital, which each of them, save his sister, had visited at one time or another. They were determined that the young man should savour his new experience slowly, and make a thorough exploration of Paris. Before his departure he was assailed by such a clamour of advice that all he had ever heard or read of Paris got mixed in a vast confusion. His mother bade him take stock of the King's Palace, which he must describe in a long letter home, her own memory of it being very vague. His sister wanted to hear of the ruins of the Bastille. His father recommended him to an excellent hostelry in the rue de l'Université, and a walk along the shady Cours la Reine. His uncle Marc would hear of no eating-house but one in the rue Neuve des Petits-Champs — the name of which he had forgotten — and recommended a tailor near the market in the rue St. Denis for a suit of Elbœuf cloth — only the name of the tailor had escaped his memory. His uncle Bernard's interest

THE GASCON

centred in the Champ de Mars and the Palais Royal gardens. And then each member of the family recalled other noteworthy things, which Armand was expected to discover for himself. The result was that as he approached the goal of his journey through the Gentilly gate, Birros, who was a dutiful young fellow and loved his family very deeply, had lost something of his usual merry look. He was weighed down with the burden of his responsibility, and felt that the happiness of many people depended on his ability to satisfy them with information, and, above all, to convince his father and his uncles that he had taken their advice seriously, and explored the capital conscientiously.

As he walked his horse down the rue de Vaugirard he looked about him in surprise. He had half expected to find himself at once among turbulent crowds and marching demonstrations ; to find every cross-roads occupied by the National Guard, and every street-corner by an impassioned orator. Instead, he saw the drab façades of uninteresting houses, and people going about their daily business as though nothing had occurred to disturb their lives. With one half of his mind he was repeating the names of the hostelries recommended by his family, and trying to remember which district each was in. The other half was intent on what he saw about him. As he drew near the gardens of the Luxembourg the houses became less dismal. Outside one of them a carriage was waiting, and even as he looked at it, two young ladies emerged from the house, and were handed into the carriage. The one was very fair, and was laughing and talking in an animated fashion. The other was dark, and evidently of a graver temperament. Birros was near enough by now to remark their beauty, and the morning sun came from behind a cloud, and the face of the young man assumed its habitual happy expression. Before the ladies were settled in their seats, and while the coachman was still awaiting the word to start, Paris was forgotten, and all the wise advice of father and uncles, and

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

all the requests of mother and sister. The purpose of his long journey was, apparently, to follow that carriage, with eyes for nothing but its occupants. It led him across the Place St. Michel and down the rue de la Harpe, and the streets became more crowded and the pace slower. Above the creaking and clattering of wheels and hoofs he could hear the "Gare! Gare!" of the drivers as they endeavoured to clear a way through the pedestrians, and he had to close up a little for fear of being separated from his quarry. The carriage crossed the river by the Pont au Change, turned to the left along the quays, to the right again, and came out in the rue St. Denis. But Birros hardly noticed the market, and his thoughts were far from the suit of Elbœuf cloth. It appeared to him the most natural thing in the world, and the most pleasant, that he should be doing what he was doing, nor did he trouble to think how the matter would end. And thus he crossed the capital from south-west to north-east, "Seeing all Paris", as he wrote to a friend, "in a few hours".

Up the rue du Temple crawled the carriage, and headed for the Belleville Gate, and the road to Picardy, and behind came Birros. Suddenly he was aware of a confusion of voices ahead of him, and then of shouts. Raising himself in his stirrups, he saw that one wheel of the carriage had become locked in the wheel of a cart coming from the opposite direction. A crowd was gathering, and everybody was crying advice. The carter was standing up and abusing the coachman, and the coachman was staring straight in front of him as though he had no part in this vulgar incident. As Birros rode up, men and women were laughing at the coachman. "His Excellency," croaked a sharp-faced wisp of a man, "is waiting for us to free the wheel. Unharness the horses, my Prince, and we will do their work." Birros came alongside the carriage. The dark girl was saying: "It was the carter's fault, but it will be better for Caudin to get down and disengage the wheel."

THE GASCON

"No, no," cried the fair girl. "The carter must do it, and some of these gaping fools can help him."

Birros swept off his hat and bowed. "Ladies," he said, "allow me to take the place of your brother." Then, with a broad smile, he turned to the carter. "Down you get," he said. "Don't keep these ladies waiting."

From the crowd, which had fallen silent, there was a murmur of disapproval. From this the carter took courage. He folded his arms, looked stubbornly at Birros, and then at the crowd for approval.

"Get down!" said Birros, still smiling, but in a different voice. And as he said it he edged his horse towards the man.

The carter swore, but he climbed down, and one or two of the men helped him with the wheel. But the rest, and particularly the women, began to make sarcastic remarks. One of them approached the carriage and examined it very carefully, raising her eyes, from time to time, to gape at the girls. The dark one was completely self-possessed and ignored the people. But the fair one showed her distaste plainly. Too plainly. When a man stared insolently at her, she said loudly: "One would think that these wretches had never seen a human being." "We, too," replied a woman, "are human beings. Pray remember that." The carriage was ready to start again before the situation had become dangerous. As it moved off there were a few curses and a few ribald remarks, and somebody threw a stone harmlessly.

Birros dropped behind the carriage and, once through the Belleville Gate, the dark girl said a word to the coachman, and he pulled up. She smiled graciously at the window, as Birros came alongside, hat in hand. But his eyes were for the fair girl at her side, whose smile was rather provoking than gracious.

"Monsieur," said the dark girl, "my sister and I are deeply grateful to you for your courtesy. To whom have we the honour to be indebted?"

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

"Armand Birros, Mademoiselle, at your service now and always."

"I am Mademoiselle Gabrielle de Vaudrelaine. This is my sister, Antoinette."

Birros bowed again, kissing the proffered hands. But one he held longer than the other.

"It was indeed brave of you, Monsieur," said the fair girl. "There might have been a riot. The people are out of hand these days. And now we must continue our journey." Her eyes said, "If by any chance your way is our way, your company will be by no means unpleasant."

"I had been about to suggest," said Birros, answering her eyes, "that I should escort you two ladies for a while. After what has occurred, and considering the unrest of the times——"

"We could not allow ourselves, Monsieur," said the elder sister, "so to presume upon your good-nature. We have not a great distance to go, and are well known in these parts."

"As you please, Mademoiselle, but my road appears to be your road."

"We follow it," said the younger girl, "to Compiègne, which is near our home."

"Compiègne!" cried Birros. "This is truly a remarkable coincidence. I, too, as it happens, am bound for Compiègne. Pray do not any longer refuse me as an escort."

Gabrielle inclined her head, and spoke to the coachman. Birros replaced his hat and fell in beside the carriage. As they travelled across the plain towards the forest of Chantilly it became obvious to him that the elder sister would have been happier without him — and that the younger sister would have been happier without her. It was not in his nature to be quiet when he was happy, and he was soon at a very pretty game of paying outrageous compliments to the two girls, while looking meaningly at the younger.

THE GASCON

Gabrielle was quite aware of the game, and was silently laughing, though slightly perturbed — on account of somebody who, she was sure, believed Antoinette to be less volatile than was the case. She felt that she had a duty to her sister on behalf of the man who loved her, and whose heart she had always feared Antoinette would break. Apart from that, she was quite capable of seeing the humour of the present situation. When they had crossed to the right bank of the Nouette and come into Senlis, a halt was called, to rest the horses, and to refresh themselves. At the sign of the Great Stag there was hot soup for the cold weather, and a roaring fire in a room away from the coming and going of other travellers.

“ You are not of this part, Monsieur ? ” asked Antoinette.

“ It is my first visit, Mademoiselle. I am from the South, from Béarn.”

“ It was a fortunate coincidence for us that a gentleman of Béarn should have business in Picardy,” said Gabrielle, with a smile.

“ It was more fortunate for the Béarnais, Mademoiselle. For I have not a friend in these parts, and a lonely journey rots the soul. It is as bad as a day without a fight.”

“ You have had many fights, Monsieur ? ” said Antoinette.

“ Some seven thousand and sixty-three, speaking rhetorically,” said Birros.

“ I have heard, Monsieur,” said Gabrielle, “ that all Gascon gentlemen talk in this extravagant fashion, in order to dazzle the ladies.”

“ Does such an ambition need any excuse, Mademoiselle — and in such company as that in which I find myself ? ”

“ Perhaps,” said Gabrielle, “ we may be able to direct you to the address to which you are bound in Compiègne. The town is well known to us.”

“ Mademoiselle,” said Birros, “ that address has gone out of my mind as completely as though it had never existed. Pouf ! ”

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

"Perhaps," said Gabrielle, forcing back her laughter, "perhaps you can remember the name of the friend you were going to see?"

"No," said Birros, pulling a gloomy face. "No. My memory is all to pieces."

"But what will become of you?" cried Antoinette merrily.

"It will all come back to me presently. I beg you not to disturb yourself. Maybe it was not Compiègne they said, after all."

"Ah!" said Antoinette, blushing furiously.

"If we take the road again now," said Gabrielle, "it is possible that you will remember why you left Béarn and where it is you wish to go."

"The trouble of the matter is," said Birros, "that I regard the present as more important than the future. It is, at any rate, something we are sure of. And I, in the present, am so happy in such delightful company that it would seem mere pedantry to talk of going anywhere definite for any purpose in particular. If the road leads to Compiègne, to Compiègne will I go. But I do not insist that it must be Compiègne, mark you, ladies. If I seem to you to be somewhat unbiassed in the matter of destinations, attribute the fault to yourselves, who could lure me to the Valley of the Moon by a mere turn of the head. However, since you are ready, let us go forward. I will summon your man, and see that all is in order."

So saying he left the room, and ordered preparations to be made for the continuation of the journey.

"Houloubourrade," he said, patting his horse's flank, "I wonder how all this will end."

As they went by the verge of the forest of Halatte, a pale sunlight shone weakly on the trunks of the bare trees, and when they came to the Oise, the clear water had the blue of early springtime.

Gabrielle, leaning out of the window, asked him if he

THE GASCON

had remembered where he was going.

"Yes," he said gaily, "but it is a secret."

"Monsieur," said Gabrielle, "may my sister and I once more thank you for the service you rendered us and for bearing us company? We shall need your protection no longer, since we have but little further to go to our own home."

That was a courteous dismissal, and Birros could not reply to it by forcing his attentions upon the ladies any further. What he was determined to know, however, was where they lived, and that is exactly what Gabrielle had determined that he should not know. Birros looked at Antoinette.

"I should deem it a privilege," he said, "if I might be allowed to pay my respects, and to assure myself that neither of you has suffered anything but a passing inconvenience from the unpleasant occurrence this morning."

Gabrielle was about to answer, but Antoinette was too quick for her. "The castle of Vaudrelaine," she said, "is not far from here. When your — business here is finished, in a day or two, if you should ride to the village of Heudeval, you would be welcome. It is a tedious life we lead, for the most part." And she sighed beautifully.

Gabrielle hid her annoyance, and gave Birros her hand. Then she spoke to the coachman and the carriage moved forward, leaving Birros seated on his horse in the middle of the street.

He watched the carriage disappear, but no hand was waved as it turned a corner. So he rode on through the town, looking idly to left and right, and humming an air of his native valley. Presently his random progress brought him to the peacefully-flowing Oise, and to a charming hostelry on the right bank, where he stabled his horse, changed his linen, and removed the stains of travel. The landlord was evidently in a happy frame of mind. So was his plump and comely wife. So were the few local people

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

in the main room. One would have sworn that some good news had fallen upon the house and its inhabitants, and Birros wondered how people so close to Paris managed to forget the hardships and bitternesses of the times.

"Where, then, is this revolution they talk so much about?" asked Birros.

"Oh, that!" said the landlord. "That is all over, Heaven be praised!"

"How, all over?"

A tubby little man with a crooked mouth said: "Monsieur has evidently not heard. The King has been to the Assembly, in person, and has sworn an oath to remain faithful to the Constitution, and the President and all the deputies have done the same, and it is decreed that this oath is to be sworn all over France, in every hamlet, by every living human being. There will be fireworks in Paris. It is all being organized here in Compiègne, and in Senlis, and in Noyon and Soissons and Laon, and in every village."

"The King," chirped another man in a falsetto voice, "the King said that he thoroughly approved of the reforms. So there will be no excuse now for any more of these burnings and robberies."

"Now that the people know," said the landlord, "that the King is on their side, they will go on with their work peaceably."

"And the Queen?" asked a disgruntled voice. "Is she also on the side of the people?"

"Who can doubt it?" replied the tubby man. "She has received the deputies, with her little son by her side, that dear little boy. I tell you that if only certain elements of the people had been more reasonable and patient, there need have been no march on Versailles and no bloodshed. Such demands can be made in a decent manner, when King and Assembly and people are all in agreement."

"Why," said the landlord, "when the King's speech to the Assembly was read in front of the Town Hall, I wept

THE GASCON

more loudly than my wife. And in St. Jacques and St. Antoine they sang a Te Deum. Imagine ! There were some who said King Louis was plotting with the émigrés ! ”

“ A revolution like that one,” said the buxom wife, “ upsets everybody’s business. I for my part am glad to see the back of it, and now we can get on with our work, without wondering what horror to-morrow will bring.”

The disgruntled voice spoke again. “ What has the revolution done for the poor vagabonds with empty bellies ? You are glad because your fat purses are to be saved. The King and the deputies will step in and use the troops to clear the streets and the country roads, and you will all be happy together. But that wasn’t what the people who began it all intended. The Bastille wasn’t destroyed in order to keep the well-to-do in their comfortable homes. It was destroyed to get poor men, slaves and outcasts, a hearing, and to get them some bread — not your good soups and roasts and pastries — only bread, to be eaten in a ditch. But perhaps the troops won’t care for their work. Perhaps their fathers and mothers and sons are hungry too.”

“ Shame on you, Julien,” said the buxom woman hotly. “ You talk of us as though we were the nobility.”

“ Was Clairefontaine burnt down by brigands in order to give the poor bread ? ” asked the tubby one.

“ Do you think the King doesn’t love the lowest of his people ? ” said the landlord excitedly.

“ Perhaps the King is only trying to save his skin,” said Julien.

At which there was a second’s appalled silence, and then a babble of voices. The man would have been attacked and beaten if the landlord had not intervened, and pushed him out of the hostelry.

“ He reads too much,” said the landlord.

“ Aye, and listens to the speakers in the streets,” added his wife.

BIRROS FOLLOWS A CARRIAGE

Birros had listened to the conversation with interest. Like everybody else in France at that time, with the exception of a few who were far in advance of public opinion, he was a Monarchist, merely from habit and instinct. It had never occurred to him that France could be anything but a Monarchy, whatever tricks were played in the name of revolution. What interested him particularly, in his dislike of the extremists on either side, was the discovery that so many healthy, middle-class men and women detested only the extremists on the revolutionary side. They could get on with the nobles, for whom, however, they had no great respect, but the mobs were their enemies.

"I have timed my arrival nicely," he said to the landlord.

"Indeed, yes. The Town Hall will be illuminated, and everybody will go mad for a while. But mad in a reasonable manner, this time. There will be sports on the water, and a ball, and music everywhere. Days and nights of it, with crowds coming in from the countryside, and all the trees hung with lanterns."

"You will do good business, landlord," said Birros.

"I have need to," replied the beaming fellow. "My jolly wife is right. Those revolutions upset business. But now everything will be sane and sensible again."

"Tell me," said Birros, "of the people of Vaudrelaine. I have some acquaintance with the young ladies. The mother and father are alive?"

The landlord's face became grave. "The mother died some years ago," he said. "The father is absent upon a journey, and enemies may tell you that he is an émigré. I know that to be a lie, for there is no nobler gentleman in Picardy than the Marquis, nor one more respected. You know the young Comte de Vaudrelaine? Ah, you do not. Again, there are enemies. He is much at Court. I will admit that he lacks the friendly ease of manner of his father. He is uncomfortable with all who are not of his world."

THE GASCON

"A common fault of youth," said Birros as though he were an old man. "The village is Heudeval, is it not? It lies far from here?"

"No more than a short ride, Monsieur. An hour or two."

As Birros stretched himself in a comfortable bed that night he seemed to hear his father's voice, describing what must not be missed: the cascade and the fountains at Saint-Cloud, and the artificial scenery in the gardens of the house of Artois, at Bagatelle. And his uncle Marc bade him particularly note the finest sight in Paris, and one that no Béarnais should fail to see within an hour of his arrival, the statue of his fellow-countryman, Henry IV, on the Pont Neuf. And his uncle Bernard impressed upon him the importance of spending at least one day looking at Sainte-Geneviève. And then all three had set about him with a catalogue of duties. "And all I saw," said Birros, smiling in the darkness, "was a girl born to break hearts. But not mine. For never lived a man who could so easily forget one pretty face for another. Ladies inclined to be kind should certainly be warned of this by a special courier."

CHAPTER THREE

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

ON an April day in the year 1790 a crowd of men and women came laughing and talking along the country road that led from Manicamp to Blérancourt. They were, for the most part, Picard peasants, with a few small farmers, notaries' clerks and shopkeepers. They were in high good-humour, and might have been a large family party, except that the head of the family appeared to be a mere

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

youth. To avoid the dust stirred up by all these trampling feet, this youth strode well in the van, and behind him and at his sides pressed the disorderly but undoubtedly triumphal procession. Dirty round hats were waved in the air, and there were fragments of song. Had the young man borne any resemblance to his escort, the scene would have been no uncommon one at this period in Picardy, or in almost any other part of France. He would have been some agitator applauded for a deed of violence, or a comrade rescued from prison. But the people's hero, in this case, was a tall dandy, who bore himself with the airs of a nobleman. His clothes, his manner of wearing them, his jewelry, his well-dressed and abundant brown hair belonged to the fopperies of Versailles, but the proud carriage of his head and a certain hardness in his blue eyes forbade a judgment so superficial. For all the gaiety of his smile and the grace of his movements, those steel-hard eyes seemed to provide the clue to his character. From time to time he would wave his hand to someone in the crowd, and although the gesture was regal, there was no condescension in it, nor any embarrassment. A man here or a woman there would cry to him as to a friend, and he would link arms with a neighbour with a natural friendliness unexpected in one who had, to a casual glance, nothing in common with those who acclaimed him so enthusiastically.

On a rise of ground above the road the Comte de Prémoncourt had reined in his horse, and had watched the scene below with a perplexed frown. Riding across country towards Manicamp, he had seen the cloud of dust and heard the chattering of the crowd. He had at first suspected that the increasing clamour marked the anger of some band of villagers, or even that a local rising was in progress. But he noted that the crowd was unarmed. Then, as it drew nearer, he saw the young man, and set him down as probably a renegade small squire of the district who had curried favour with the paid agitators in order to pose as a

THE GASCON

champion of the peasants. He was struck by the beauty of the young man's face. Then there came a bend in the road and a small wood, which hid the concourse, and left only a slowly settling dust and a fading murmur on the air. Since the people were jovial, he took it for granted that no harm was intended to anybody's property. And, for the thousandth time, he considered in his mind the strangeness of the days in which he lived, when a man might, by taking two steps round a corner, come clean out of his own quiet affairs into the tempest of history.

Though he sat his horse in a soldierly fashion, Félicien de Prémoncourt had a grave and studious look, and the pale face of a scholar. And though he looked about him at the beauty of the awakening year, his dark eyes were full of melancholy, as though autumn, not spring, were in his blood. The firm set of his jaw expressed not only strength of will, but acquaintance with sorrow. At twenty-eight he had acquired fortitude. Of medium height and sparely built, he was simply but richly dressed. The lace at his wrists and throat was costly, and his fawn breeches and blue riding-coat were of an admirable cut. His broad-brimmed blue hat was fastened at the side with a gold brooch, and he wore a plain sword-belt with a silver-hilted sword in an unornamented scabbard. His black hair was unpowdered. As he road slowly towards Manicamp, he met two men running in the direction of Blérancourt — evidently stragglers in the procession.

"What is afoot yonder?" he asked.

But the men were in too great a hurry to bother with his questions.

"Are they gone far?" cried one of them.

"You'll soon catch them," said the horseman.

He went on to Manicamp where he had business with the Comte de Lauraguais. He found the Comte from home, and the servants excited, and inclined to be uneasy. From an old groom he learned how there had been speech-

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

making at Chauny and how the people had gathered from the villages to lead the hero of the occasion home in triumph.

"But what was the occasion?"

"Some question, Monsieur le Comte, of whether Soissons or Laon shall be the chief town of the new Department."

"And the villagers care deeply about that?"

"It is an excuse, Monsieur le Comte, for speeches and cheering and uproar."

"But why should this nonsense disturb you, Loubard?"

"On the way back, Monsieur le Comte, a crowd of them came here, and the youngster who had made the speech for them at Chauny asked for my master, very civilly, but as if it was all a great joke. As he went away this youngster flicked his cane at one of the tall ferns we have by the gate, and he knocked the top off it, and they all laughed and cheered. And then they went away, laughing and singing and very pleased with themselves — but not at all in the way people laugh and sing when they are mad for blood and destruction. They were like a crowd of children on a holiday — all so happy. But it is puzzling."

"It was doubtless some young drunkard's prank," said Prémoncourt, to reassure the servants. "By the way, who was this young fool?"

"They said it was the young Saint-Just, Monsieur le Comte, from Blérancourt."

"I never heard of him. Who is he, Loubard?"

"A wild boy, Monsieur le Comte. There is some scandal about him and a lawyer's wife. They say he is a poet."

"A poet!" said Prémoncourt, remembering the face. "I should not be surprised."

He turned his horse and rode slowly homewards through the woods. For all the hardness and the melancholy of his face he was by no means unaware of the spring about him. But he took no joy of it, and found no meaning in it, because it had no power to light or to warm his dark, cold thoughts. As he came along the track between the tall trees, the

THE GASCON

reins hung loose, hardly grasped in his hands, and the horse went as it would, knowing well the way to the stable. A brief shower of rain, blown into his face by an April gust, made him look up, and he saw that evening was at hand, and that he was already in the avenue that led to the castle of Prémoncourt. With a sigh of satisfaction he squared his shoulders, feeling that here in his demesne he was separated from the world, not only by the encircling forest but by the centuries. All that he saw his forbears had seen. Young trees had grown old, and old trees had been blown down or felled. Nothing else had changed.

He rode through the main arch into the forecourt, and there dismounted, throwing the reins to a serving man. On the hearth in the vast stone-flagged hall logs were ablaze, for the April evening was turning chilly. He had but stooped to warm his hands when an old man came shuffling to tell him that the Marquis de Villers-Molain awaited him. He found his dead father's oldest friend standing at a high window in one of the rooms which looked on to a terrace, below which the forest began. As the young man entered, the Marquis turned from the window to face him, and Félicien noted once more with surprise the slim, straight figure, the unlined features, the bright clear eyes. Only the feebleness of the voice betrayed the age of his visitor.

"Ah, Félicien," he said, returning the bow, "if I had lived here alone as a young man I should have become mad."

"Yet surely the landscape is not lacking in beauty, Monsieur le Marquis?"

"Oh, it is beautiful enough, but as a retreat for some aged misanthrope who has finished with life. I hope I do not disturb your studies."

"The times are not favourable to such work as mine, but at all times I should be honoured by your visit." He paused and then continued: "You would think, would you not, that here, in silence and solitude, such a task as

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

mine would be pursued from day to day in conditions almost perfect ? ”

“ I should think nothing so foolish. There is nowhere sufficiently remote to-day for a man to escape the tumult. Whether we like it or not, my friend, we are all a part of what is happening. We cannot escape — not even you, Félicien, bowed over your Horace and your Catullus, and labouring at your work on the Latin poets.”

“ What do you suggest that I should do to employ my time better ? ”

“ What your father would have done. What I would do, were I younger. Take your side. Either attack or defend, before chaos comes. I know that you have some sympathy with the new ideas, but it is the sympathy of a scholar and a theorist. Either put that sympathy to the test ; step down on to the battle-ground and make acquaintance with your theories where they pass into action. Or — as I would naturally prefer — take your part in defending the established order.”

“ Monsieur le Marquis,” answered the young man, “ the debate that is joined to-day cannot be so simplified, and compromise, not chaos, will be the end of the matter. The time for men like me to act, one way or the other, will be when it can be seen clearly whether or not such a compromise can be lasting, and can serve the ends of justice.”

“ I beg you, speak more plainly, Félicien.”

“ I will. I believe that in this quarrel there is right on both sides, and wrong on both sides. The abuse of privilege is abominable and so are the methods of the mobs. The proudest function of Kingship is to champion the cause of the people against those who oppress them. Let the King lead the Revolution before he is dragged in its wake. Let——”

“ Let Monsieur de Mirabeau take things in hand, act as a go-between ! ”

“ Precisely.”

THE GASCON

The eyes of the old gentleman flashed angrily. "That vile, corrupt, debauched adventurer!"

"All that, if you will, but an astute man of affairs. He will do anything for money."

"Even save his country, to sell it to a higher bidder. But nothing is to be gained by arguing with you people who live between the covers of a book."

Darkness was advancing outside the windows. Wine had been brought, and candles lit, and now, behind heavy curtains, the two men sat by the hearth, each with a glass at his elbow. From time to time the Marquis glanced with a kind of anxiety at the young man, as though he would speak of some matter, yet hesitated to do so. Félicien, busy with his thoughts, stared at the logs, and now and then jabbed at them with his foot. Presently he said, with his eyes still on the fire :

"In times such as these, Monsieur le Marquis, we who are of a studious temperament, and in no wise men of action, are possibly able to see what is happening and what is likely to happen better than those who are in the midst of the events of the day, and spend their time making history. This revolution is not a simple matter of right against wrong. Fanatics are trying to destroy much that is of supreme value and can never be replaced. But there are fanatics on the other side who will not admit that there is any single demand of the people which is just, or even reasonable. The civilized world lives by compromise. The danger to-day is that the less intelligent among the nobility will so infuriate the people that all the baser elements of the mob will pass completely out of the control of their more moderate leaders. When that happens the Monarchy itself will be involved in the resulting anarchy."

The old Marquis shrugged his shoulders impatiently and flung his right hand out in a gesture of anger.

"Words, words, words," he said. "When all your

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

subtleties are examined, what do they amount to? A lot of down-at-heel lawyers, with a gift for inflaming fools by all the cheapest tricks of rhetoric, have discovered a short cut to fame and affluence. The popular thing is to covet your neighbour's property, to rant about equality. Is the theft of my lands going to make the thief my equal? And mark you this, Félicien. You blab about the people. What people? My servants are happy enough with the world as it is. It is not the people who want a change . . . at least not until they have been got at by demagogues."

Félicien smiled. "No member of a privileged class," he said, "ever likes anybody to remind the oppressed that they are oppressed. By giving up some of our privileges we shall save the rest. By trying to save all, we shall lose all."

"Nom de Dieu, man! Have we not given up some of our privileges? What about the decree of August the eleventh?"

"As you know, the King opposes it still. Hence, continued insurrection. By giving up too little, we have called the attention of the peasants to their remaining burdens. They no longer take their condition for granted. Why do you suppose they burn our title-deeds?"

"Obviously, to remove the proof of our rights."

"Precisely, Monsieur le Marquis. To prevent the King's Commissioners from confirming those rights."

"The peasants can appeal if they think they are wronged."

"Oh, undoubtedly. To the manorial courts, at their own expense. Meanwhile, they can go on asking our permission to bake a loaf or cross a bridge or shoot the pigeons which are destroying their crops."

"My young friend," said the Marquis, in disgust, "you talk like one of those firebrands of the Palais Royal."

"Your pardon, if I have grown heated. Let us talk no more politics."

Again that look of anxiety came into the old man's face,

THE GASCON

as though he were once more about to touch a delicate matter.

"I had, as a matter of fact," he said, "an object in making my visit at such an unusual hour."

He paused, and Félicien moved his hand, bidding his guest continue.

"Have you ridden of late to Vaudrelaine?"

Now at the mention of that name, the young man's eyes had lifted from the burning logs for a moment. He was like one who has heard a horn in the woods. The movement would have appeared natural to anybody who, not knowing his affairs, was ignorant of the power of that name upon him. But the Marquis had marked it.

The young man lowered his head again and said: "It is many months since I rode that way. All is well, I trust?" Even his voice did not betray his anxiety. Nor was there any hint in his bearing of the questions he wanted to ask.

"All is by no means well," the Marquis replied. "You know that headstrong Vaudrelaine blood as well as I do. Michel will bring trouble upon himself and upon his family."

"What has he done?"

"At present it is more a question of injudicious talk than of any rash action. Wild talk. As you know, his father has always been respected and loved, and no attack has been made on his property, but——"

"Cannot his father curb this wild talk?"

"He is over the Rhine by now, with Condé."

The young man started up. "You mean," he said, turning to face the Marquis, "you mean—he has emigrated, and left his family behind at Heudeval?"

"They are to join him later, I understand."

"Meanwhile——?"

"Meanwhile they are all three of them there, but of course the two sisters can do nothing with Michel. Antoinette, being high-spirited, seems to approve his dangerously

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO NOBLEMEN

honest attitude. Gabrielle is the more alarmed."

" Michel seems to be putting into practice your advice to me, Monsieur le Marquis. He has chosen his side and is attacking."

" My dear Félicien, there are other ways of attacking, less rash and foolhardy. Nothing will be gained by getting Vaudrelaine burnt down, with God knows what perils beside for two motherless girls whose father is an émigré."

" But why, Monsieur, do you come to me ? " The young man's voice was angry, and he turned again to the hearth, leaning both hands on the chimney-piece.

" Have you, by chance, heard of an individual called Armand Birros ? "

" Certainly I have," replied Félicien, without moving.

" He seems to be in sympathy with the new ideas. An impoverished adventurer from some Pyrenean valley, I gather. A forceful fellow, from what little I have seen of him, with some pretensions to being a gentleman — in a very small way. He is much at Vaudrelaine, dancing attendance on — Antoinette."

The slight pause before the name was intentional.

Félicien turned about and began to pace up and down, while the Marquis watched him closely.

" I take your meaning," he said, " but this man Birros will bring no danger to Vaudrelaine. His protection may even be valuable. On my last visit, Antoinette herself informed me that my attentions were unwelcome to her and that it would oblige her if I would cease to pay my suit to her. I asked no questions, for none were needed. I have never set eyes on Monsieur Birros, but he is evidently a man to take the fancy of a high-spirited girl. You see now, Monsieur le Marquis, that my interference is not to be thought of."

" I see nothing of the sort," snapped the old gentleman. " The danger lies in the antagonism between Michel and this Birros. Birros may do what he can to protect the girls,

THE GASCON

but their brother will make it impossible. At present Birros treats the young man as an insolent puppy, hardly worth a thrashing, but one day Michel may go too far. Besides, who is to say what the intentions of this adventurer are with regard to Antoinette ? ”

“ And what do you propose that I should do ? ” asked Félicien, halting in front of the Marquis.

“ This. Go and talk to Michel. You are old friends. Counsel discretion. Show him the danger of the position over there. You might even put the girls on their guard against Birros — tactfully, of course.”

“ And have my motives misunderstood ! I thank you — no. If I ride to Vaudrelaine it will be to see Michel and to form my own opinion of the situation. It is my impression that the sooner these girls join their father, the better for their safety it will be.”

“ Since you seem to live out of the workaday world,” said the Marquis, “ I can tell you a little more about affairs in these parts. Birros is not the chief danger. He is one of those gay-hearted rascals who takes nothing very seriously for long. Any part he has in the present disturbances is likely to be for the fun of the thing. But there is a man of another stamp over there, a down-at-heel wretch of a youth from a wine-shop in Laon. Chassaviel is his name, and it is he who goes about the countryside stirring up trouble. He’s a mere guttersnipe with a loud voice and a miserable underfed body. He got his nose slit in Anizy, and that has not improved either his beauty or his temper. He is, in fact, what the philosophers call the sovereign people, and one glance at him would probably do more than all my sermons to modify your innocent theories.”

“ I will glance at Monsieur Chassaviel,” said Félicien with a smile, “ and then give him a wide berth.”

The Marquis now rose, and Félicien pulled a bell-cord to summon the old servitor.

“ The horse of Monsieur le Marquis, Bavart,” he said ;

THE QUARREL

and he accompanied the old gentleman down a corridor and out into the great hall. The night was dark, and outside the oaken door, upon the broad stone steps, stood a lackey with a torch, while another led the chestnut mare forward. With a salutation the Marquis departed down the avenue, sitting his mount like a young man.

Left alone, Félicien climbed to a small corner tower which was furnished as a library. On his table were the books and papers he had left earlier in the day. He turned over the pages of his Catullus, and his eye lighted on the lines :

Nulla fides ullo fuit unquam in foedere tanta,
Quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperta mea est.

He sat for a great while in thought. And his meditation was not the meditation of a scholar, but rather of a young man bending beneath the intolerable burden of an unhappy love.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE QUARREL

YOUNG Michel de Vaudrelaine, shortly after his initiation into the life of the Court at Versailles, had been overjoyed to hear a woman say : " Versailles stamps a man with an indelible mark ". From that moment he had exaggerated the airs which he was expected to give himself, until he was satisfied that by his walk, by his voice, by his smile, the world would know that he was of the Court. Yet he was young enough, at twenty-three, and healthy enough to retain his individuality. And when he was, so to speak, off the stage, he was an attractive and an agreeable young man whose absurd impetuosity was endearing, since it sprang

THE GASCON

from a generous heart. Standing now, on a spring afternoon, before his elder sister in the gardens of Vaudrelaine, he looked more like a sulky boy than a gay gallant. It was the privilege of Gabrielle de Vaudrelaine, three years his senior, to talk to him as his dead mother might have talked. He had an intense admiration for this grave and beautiful girl, who, in spite of her air of moving among dreams, gave advice that he knew to be sound, and appeared to have learnt the world and its ways while leading a secluded life among the woods of Picardy.

So Michel stood before her like a schoolboy who has been rebuked. She was seated on one of those rustic seats of the kind affected by the Queen and her friends in the Trianon gardens, and she watched him as he fidgeted with his riding-whip before answering her.

"Everything you say is true, Gabrielle — but it changes nothing. What would you think of me if I allowed myself to be humiliated by anybody who cares to insult the King and Queen — if I showed no resentment ? "

"I should know that the resentment was there, but that you could at present serve us all better by concealing it. Just at this moment, with our father away, it is perilous to seek quarrels. And that is what you do, Michel. Nobody doubts either your courage or your loyalty, that you must be for ever parading them."

"This Birros——"

"You allow him to infuriate you. He plays with you. Your hostility to him is so plainly seen that it encourages Antoinette to take his part."

"Antoinette is a little fool, to be flattered by the first swaggerer who comes along. If I were Félicien——"

"If you were Félicien you would challenge Monsieur Birros to a duel. Affairs of the heart are not settled in that simple fashion nowadays."

Michel sat down beside her on the seat and turned towards her, with a smile replacing his sulky look.

THE QUARREL

"Gabrielle, do you know what I think? I think that you and Antoinette should join our father the moment there is word from him. The Marquis de Villers-Molain will go with you. This business in France is getting too complicated and too dangerous for women. There is work for me here, and work for our father over the frontiers, but the presence of women here——"

For the first time Gabrielle smiled; a smile that showed how young she was, for all her poise and solemnity.

"We shall go," she said, "soon enough for you to get yourself into trouble. Do not be so impatient. Meanwhile all I ask of you, Michel, is that you keep that tongue of yours out of mischief, and that you remember, whatever anybody hints, that our father is in Paris."

"Is that what Antoinette tells Monsieur Birros?"

"I have no idea what Antoinette tells Monsieur Birros. Our father's whereabouts is none of his business."

"I hope he realizes that. I don't trust our Monsieur Birros."

"He is only a passing fancy. Leave them alone and Antoinette will come to her senses. He is of those who make amusing companions. But there comes a time when a girl expects such a man to become serious. And that he will never be."

"You should blush for your knowledge of men, Gabrielle."

"I believe some girls are born with that knowledge — for their protection, perhaps."

An exclamation from Michel made her rise to join him. He had jumped up and was looking down a ride through the woods, which led to a path by the side of the Aisne. A horseman had come into view, and she was in time to see his distant figure before the woods hid him again.

"It is Félicien!" cried Michel gaily. "I'm going to meet him." And he strode away towards a path that would bring him into the avenue before his friend reached the castle.

THE GASCON

At the sound of that name Gabrielle's face had changed, for her heart answered as though her brother's cry had been a question. Nobody could have said whether happiness or unhappiness had changed her, but only that she was most profoundly stirred.

"Félicien!" shouted Michel, as he broke through the bushes into the avenue.

"Michel!"

"Why, you old scholar! You old mole! Have you really crept out at last?"

For a minute or two they discussed trivialities. Then Félicien said: "Monsieur de Villers-Molain was with me the other day at Prémoncourt."

"And lectured you about me. And Gabrielle has been lecturing me. On the whole, everybody seems to be agreed that I am responsible for the condition of France."

Félicien smiled, and though there were but five years between their ages, the smile was paternal.

"The Marquis," said Félicien, "told me that your father — was gone. I am wondering what the situation is here. I mean, how soon your sisters are to go, and what arrangements are being made."

"We have had no word from my father," Michel answered.

"Nobody, of course, knows where he has gone?"

"Nobody. If questions were asked, he would be in Paris."

When they came within sight of the stables, Michel called a man to take his friend's horse and feed it. Then they walked slowly together in the grounds.

"What decided your father to leave France?" asked Félicien.

"His conviction," replied Michel, "that this revolution is going too fast for the King, and that, to end all hesitation, he must know that there is support for him outside France; organized support."

THE QUARREL

“ That means civil war. I have more faith in Monsieur de Mirabeau.”

“ You still harp on Monsieur de Mirabeau ? If I am not mistaken, he would have the King play revolutionary and admit that the French Monarchy — the Monarchy that made France — is finished. In its place we are to have a prisoner who will set his signature to whatever paper the greasy mob thrusts in front of him. He is to betray his Court, his friends ; and his reward is to be some sort of new-fangled, degraded Kingship which Monsieur de Mirabeau has invented — or copied from his books of political philosophy.”

“ You would preserve the Monarchy as it has been, even if it meant calling in foreign princes and foreign armies to fight the French people ? My dear Michel, whatever is in your father’s mind, it is not that.”

“ What question is there of foreign armies ? ”

“ You, who move in the world, should be able to answer that. It is but two months since the conspiracy of Maillebois was discovered. Has the Court no agents in Rome, Madrid, Berlin, London, Turin ? ”

“ They are there to raise money for Bouillé, so that the King’s armies may protect the King.”

Félicien glanced at his friend, as though to say “ Now I wonder who crammed his head with that nonsense ? ” But he made no comment.

Presently, as they turned at the end of a path, Michel said : “ The point at issue between us is quite clear, Félicien. You, in your heart, believe in this revolution. I do not. You are ready to accept the proposition that, because families like ours have no place in any scheme of the philosophers, therefore, on the word of the philosophers, or rather of those who have got drunk on their writings, we must go. I am not ready to accept that proposition. You think that the ‘ sovereign people ’ ” — this he said with infinite scorn — “ will be contented if the King throws

THE GASCON

them a few reforms to humour them. I, on the other hand, think that they will be like tigers who have smelt blood. You believe in compromise. I do not. Your idea of the 'sovereign people' is of decent citizens demanding their rights. My idea of the 'sovereign people' — and remember, I have seen the beast at work, in Paris — is of a creature hardly human, to whom all this new philosophy means nothing but an excuse to burn, to rape, to torture, and to murder. Is not that a fair statement of what is at issue between us, Félicien ? ”

“ No, it is not,” Félicien replied. “ The real quarrel between us is that I remember the religion of my boyhood, while you have forgotten yours.”

“ What on earth has religion to say in the matter ? ”

“ Nobody who had ever practised the Catholic religion could have so low an opinion of his fellow men as you have. You speak as though families like ours came into being by a special act of creation at the beginning of the world. You confuse the crimes committed by slaves driven mad by a sudden breath of freedom, with the demands of those who have suffered less. What answer have you, or any of us, to the Rights of Man ? ”

“ Do you think the people who burned Roumesnil to the ground and killed the family and all the servants were bothering about the Rights of Man ? ”

“ Certainly they were not. But one of the most difficult problems at a time like this is how to restrain hotheads and their followers, who, I agree, are merely anxious to exploit the disorder everywhere. Condemn the means, but not the end. Condemn the abuse of a principle, but not the principle.”

Michel was about to reply, and the argument might have gone on and on, getting nowhere, like most arguments. The two men had come to an open lawn between low hedges. Michel said : “ Upon my soul, Félicien——” when a loud and merry laugh rang out, followed by a deep

THE QUARREL

voice saying : " Not the least of the pleasures of the society of ladies is that there is no accursed political squabbling. How happy I am with ladies, in a garden, in the spring-time ! It consoles me for the loss of my own valley, so many leagues away." Up wide stone steps, some twenty yards from the spot the two men had reached, came Gabrielle and Antoinette, with a broad-shouldered young man between them.

" Armand Birros ! " muttered Michel angrily.

Félicien, prepared to detest the interloper at sight, was surprised to see a good-natured, honest, snub-nosed face, framed in red hair which hung down straight on each side of the head, and was cut in a fringe in front. The man before him was only twenty-three years of age, but he was completely self-possessed. It was difficult not to find that frank expression of the blue eyes attractive — difficult, until Félicien realized how supremely satisfied with himself the man appeared to be. Energy came from him like some electric force. When he spoke he seemed to speak with his whole strong body, and there surely was never a man so much in love with life, so pleased with himself, with everybody about him, and with the wide world. Even the grave Gabrielle smiled when she looked at him, and as for Antoinette, she had clearly met a match for her high spirits.

The contrast of the two sisters was striking. Gabrielle was dark, beautiful, composed. Antoinette was fair, pretty, animated. As Félicien looked at Antoinette he thought once more that there could be nobody so radiant, so lovely, so incomparably graceful. She danced rather than walked. Her voice lilted. And the changes of mood followed each other in her face like April cloud and sunshine.

The moment he had seen Birros, Michel had instinctively assumed the airs of the Court. But Birros was the only one with eyes to notice this. The young man's movements became languid, his hardly perceptible smile supercilious. He was easy game. There was a moment of

THE GASCON

awkward silence. Félicien was breaking his heart all over again; Antoinette was secretly annoyed at his presence, which reminded her of things she wished to forget; Michel was determined to carry off the situation with dignity, and to suffer no liberties from Birros; Birros thought only of making sport of a pretentious and tiresome fool; Gabrielle, aware of all these things, trusted Félicien to keep the situation within the bounds of triviality, outside which there was danger. This Félicien might have done, had not his eyes and his mind been upon Antoinette. But he missed his chance. The silence ended. Bows and compliments were exchanged. And Birros, twisting his magnificent red moustache, grinned at Michel. Michel produced a gold snuff-box from the pocket of his coat, took a pinch, and flicked the residue from the lapel of his coat with a lace handkerchief. Birros laughed boisterously, but not in the least offensively.

"Monsieur is amused?" said Michel with a drawl.

"Monsieur is amused — yes," said Birros, nodding his head.

"Might one so far presume upon the privileges of a host as to beg to be allowed to share the guest's amusement?"

"Faith, you'll need a mirror," said Birros.

The tone was inoffensive, but the words were offensive. Michel lost a little of his languor.

Félicien had drawn the two girls aside, but not out of earshot, and while he tried to distract their attention from what was going on, he himself missed nothing.

"I wish I were as easily amused as you, Monsieur Birros."

"I share your wish, Monsieur de Vaudrelaine. I had always heard of the gaiety of the young noblemen at Court."

"Possibly the ideas of gaiety prevailing at the Court differ from those in fashion in your remote valley."

"Ha! Be sure they do, Monsieur. And from what I hear, there is no great cause for gaiety at the Tuileries at present. Else why should so many noblemen — Xistre!

THE QUARREL

but I was about to say rats — leave the ship ? ”

Fortunately Birros was occupied with Michel and did not hear Gabrielle's little gasp or see Félicien's start of surprise. Michel, who took this last taunt as evidence that Birros knew whither his father had gone, lost his lackadaisical air entirely, and was only able, by an effort of will, to avoid betraying his fear. He drew himself up and said angrily : “ Monsieur, I must remind you that you are speaking of my friends.”

The smile left the face of Birros. “ Impossible,” he said. “ Your chance companions, your acquaintances, if you will. I am persuaded, Monsieur, that they are no friends of yours who thus desert their post at such an hour. Only a determination to quarrel with me could lead you to place such a construction on my words. Take my foolery for foolery, Monsieur, and do not seek for hidden meanings where there are none. Has it not occurred to you that I am making fun of you ? ”

“ It is a pastime I resent,” said Michel with dignity.

Birros sighed and bowed.

Gabrielle said in a low voice to Félicien : “ This is intolerable. Cannot something be done to stop them ? ”

“ It is the fault of Michel,” said Antoinette. “ He is determined to pick a quarrel. His attitude from the first has been discourteous, and even offensive. My sister, let us withdraw.”

The girls stepped on to a path and were soon lost among tall bushes. Félicien at once approached the two men, with the object of diverting their conversation into more harmless channels. But Michel was utterly ill at ease, and that self-satisfied smile which never seemed to fade for more than a moment from the face of Birros, exasperated him still. It began to exasperate Félicien, whose melancholy look and professorial brow were food and drink to the irrepressible and often most inconvenient sense of humour of Birros ; until he remembered that a matter not uncon-

THE GASCON

nected with his frequent presence at Vaudrelaine played a great part in that melancholy. For he knew that Félicien was a rejected suitor. He decided that there had been enough sport for one day. He made a movement to follow the two sisters.

"One moment, Monsieur," said Michel. "Have you not forgotten something?"

Turning, Birros intercepted a glance exchanged between Michel and Félicien, and completely misinterpreted it. "So," he said to himself, "those two fine gentlemen are set on a quarrel." Aloud he said: "Forgotten something? But, no."

"You owe me an explanation."

"Morbieu!" said Birros in a full voice, "was ever such folly? Can a man not make a butt of another without presenting him with a treatise explaining why he does it?"

Michel's face was pale. Again Félicien looked at him, and again Birros misread the look.

"By explanation I mean apology," said Michel, standing very still.

Growing desperate, Félicien attempted to intervene. "Monsieur Birros," he said, "I think——"

"What, you too?" cried Birros. "Why, Monsieur, I have not even begun to make fun of *you* — yet." And he laughed.

What Félicien did next was the result of no sudden loss of temper. It was the result partly of nervous strain, partly of personal resentment of a successful rival, and partly of a conviction that Michel must be stopped from brawling at a time when the family desired no attention called to itself. Félicien walked quickly the few paces that separated him from Birros, and dealt him a stinging blow across the right cheek with his riding-glove. Michel had snatched at his friend's arm, but had been too late.

A look of amazement spread over the face of the man who had been thus unexpectedly attacked. Then, with

THE QUARREL

an oath, as Félicien stepped back, he pushed forward the hilt of his sword with his left hand. Across came his right, and he drew the sword from its scabbard. His broad shoulders squared, his large head thrust forward, he said with a kind of rollicking carelessness : " No man does that to Armand Birros and lives ! On guard, my fine cockerel ! "

" There are certain formalities to be observed," said Félicien calmly ; " such a matter as seconds and the fixing of time and place."

" Entrails of my entrails ! " roared Birros. " I have read of such things. Where I come from, Monsieur, we fight in hot blood when there is fighting to be done. Prepare, Monsieur, or must I kill you with the back of my hand since you are so slow to draw ? "

" As you will, Monsieur," said Félicien.

Since they were to fight on grass, they removed their boots, and, as Félicien took off his coat he was vaguely aware that Michel was talking eagerly to him. He paid no heed. He was remembering that here on this lawn, two years gone by, he had thought that he saw in Antoinette's eyes the answer to the question he had come to ask. Birros was still storming at him for his slowness, but he took his time. He had no doubt of the issue, since he mistook for anger what was a youthful rage of fighting, and he fancied that a provincial like Birros would have learnt his fencing from some country teacher of the second class. He himself was still angry, but it was a cold controlled anger. He had no thought of killing his man, and he had every confidence in his own skill. For he had been soldier as well as scholar. The only one of the three men who had changed colour was Michel, who realized too late what he had brought about.

The men faced each other, saluted with their swords, and the blades rasped.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DUEL

WHEN the blades of two good swordsmen meet, each "feels" the blade of the opponent as part of the brain and physique and temperament of that opponent. Each imparts something of himself to the steel, which can be read and understood by the other. And for each, on the present occasion, there was an initial surprise. Félicien was prepared for wild onslaught, for great strength, and poor judgment. Birros expected academic correctness, soft muscles, and no inspiration. Birros found himself called upon in the first exchanges to parry in quinte a swift and vigorous attack which started with a double feint. Félicien met a skilled and supple defence. His attempts to provoke his opponent to a headlong assault were a complete failure. Birros realized that the fight would be a long one, and his heart grew merrier than ever, for his delight was in the sheer sword-play for its own sake. Félicien knew that, though but a few years older than his opponent, he was not at his full strength, owing to the more or less sedentary life he had led of late. For him, the fight must be a short one. And so the restrained, sad-eyed Félicien developed a fiery attack, while the impetuous and careless Birros encouraged him to spend his energy and remained on the defensive.

Félicien tried trick after trick, but he could not break through that rock-steady guard. Once he drove Birros back step by step, and thought he had him, but the final lunge was parried, and the riposte followed so quickly that Félicien only recovered his balance in time to disengage clumsily. Once again, with a series of short thrusts he confused his opponent, and was pressing in hotly, when

THE DUEL

he slipped. He heard Michel's cry, but he righted himself at once. Birros had made no attempt to take advantage of the accident. Félicien's knees and wrist were tiring, and he decided that the time had come to conserve his remaining strength by falling back on defensive play. But Birros, as though the sword of his antagonist had spoken to him, delivering up its master's secret, showed no inclination to hurry matters, or to oblige by making the pace. So that there were some moments of unproductive, inartistic give and take ; a kind of interlude, as though both men were thinking of something else.

Then, without warning, Birros suddenly passed to the attack. It was an exuberant but not very sound display, and Félicien took heart. But the sweep and gusto of the performance made it dangerous. That darting, circling blade lacked the precision which must accompany speed, yet it required the wit of a practised fighter to deal with so boisterous an onset. And when it was over and the defence firm and unbroken, Félicien was considerably wearier. He had the additional exasperation of knowing that he was the better swordsman, and that he was being deliberately worn down. Both men were sweating freely by now, but only Félicien breathed heavily. He remembered then how Yves de Saint-Gelais, the best swordsman of Poitou, had once said to him, " If ever you find yourself fighting a stronger, more robust man than yourself, you must feign to be more exhausted than you are, in order to draw him on, and so persuade him to take risks. Do not play-act. That is to say, do not counterfeit heavy breathing and a weak arm. Anybody can see through such games. Instead, be listless, and make one or two mistakes that a tired man would make. Then, when he is singing to himself that he has the bird in the net, make your supreme effort."

Félicien now set himself to play this game. He had no need to counterfeit heavy breathing or even a weakening

THE GASCON

arm, but he deliberately became a fraction slower in his movements. He parried less strongly. He gave ground unnecessarily. And after a time he knew that Birros was gathering himself for another of those tempestuous attacks. Even to the point of danger he encouraged the idea that he had nothing in reserve. With a less athletic opponent this stratagem would have husbanded his strength, but with Birros it was impossible to mark time, and so he found that he was growing not fresher but wearier — and, by now, at an alarming rate. Then the attack came. Félicien fought it off and, as soon as possible, knowing that it was now or never, since he could not keep it up at this pace, he passed, with a tautening of his muscles, to the attack. Birros was caught unprepared. There was a moment when he retreated, parrying desperately. Félicien's point grazed his right thigh, slitting the stuff of his shirt, and then was almost through in sixte, and yet again in tierce. Encouraged beyond his hopes, Félicien pressed the attack, now using all his art and all his power. Birros frowned, as though to say "What the devil is this?" And still Félicien kept it up, thrust upon thrust, parry, riposte, feint, and thrust again. Both men realized that the end was near, that one way or another the matter would be settled within a few minutes. Michel, watching with folded arms, knew it too.

Birros was slowly and stubbornly giving ground again. Félicien recognized that the climax of his last and greatest effort had come, but he knew that his strokes lacked power. His arm was weakening. Yet he gave his opponent no respite. He feinted, and followed the feint with a swift, strong thrust, his right foot and arm extended to their utmost limit. But the recovery was too slow. Birros had stepped back, and now attacked in his turn. After a short exchange, there was a cry. Félicien felt a stinging wound below his right shoulder, which paralysed his sword arm. The sword dropped from his grasp, he stumbled blindly forward, and was caught by Birros, who, with Michel,

THE DUEL

lowered him gently to the ground. Before the bleeding was staunched with a strip torn from Michel's shirt, Félicien had swooned from exhaustion and pain.

"That was the best fight I ever had," said Birros. "He fights like a man, your friend."

Félicien opened his eyes slowly. He lay so comfortably in bed, and felt so weak that he moved only his head, looking this way and that, and trying to remember what had happened to him. As he pieced the events together in his mind, he surmised that he must be in a room of the castle at Vaudrelaine. His right shoulder pained him when he tried to sit up, but when he shifted on to his left elbow he knew at once where he was. It was a room in which he had often slept on his visits. The curtains of the bed were drawn back, and he could see a window. On the window-seat Gabrielle was sitting, the brightness from outside shining on her dark hair and her serene face. She was gazing out over the woods, motionless, her hands folded in her lap. She heard his movement and rose and came swiftly and quietly to him.

"Is your wound painful?" she asked.

Without answering the question he began to accuse himself of what he had done. "So to become involved in a brawl!" he said scornfully. "It was the act of a callow boy."

"It had to end in a fight," she said. "Anybody could see that. Monsieur Birros loves to tease Michel, and Michel has not the sense to know that when a big dog wants to play with you, you humour him, and there is a friendly rough-and-tumble. But how do you come into it, Félicien? Michel is raving of fighting Birros himself. He says you took his quarrel on yourself, to protect him."

"That is not true, Gabrielle. I lost my head and struck him, and I got what I deserve. How long have I been here?"

THE GASCON

"They brought you in yesterday, before twilight. Doctor Chaverny has seen you. The wound is light, and should heal quickly; a matter of some muscles in the shoulder."

"I must go back to Prémoncourt," he said. "I cannot allow myself to be a burden here."

She knew what was in his mind, and so made no attempt to urge him to stay. He was indeed humiliated that, after Antoinette's dismissal of him, he should be forced to accept the hospitality of her home.

"It will be a few days," she said, "before you can travel. Until that time, as you know well, without words of mine, you are welcome here, and I will see that you lack for nothing."

His gratitude would have embarrassed her, but he was hardly listening to what she said. So many happy days this room recalled. So many mornings when he had risen early to ride with Antoinette. So many nights when he had retired to bed to reconstruct in his mind the lightest events of the day, and to repeat once more to himself the most trivial words. Gabrielle, watching his face, could read something of his thoughts. Then, as though conscious of his discourtesy, he smiled at her.

"You are most kind to me, Gabrielle," he said.

But he could not read her answering smile.

While this conversation was taking place, away in the kitchens a scullion, a poor stooping fellow who had been rescued a year ago from bandits by Michel and given employment, had decided that the time had come for him to rise in the world. If the new ideas meant anything, said he to himself, they meant that poor Vidoche's hour had come. All the talk was of the oppressed and downtrodden, and who was oppressed and downtrodden if not he? He knew there was a mystery about Monsieur le Marquis. They said he was in Paris, but they said that about a lot of people. And wasn't there a soldier below in the village who had seen the Marquis changing horses at Buzancy?

THE DUEL

The soldier said that a man who rode to Paris by way of Buzancy must be mad, since it was on the route to the frontier. Vidoche had heard great talk about that frontier, and one day he found a map in a room of the castle, and there was Buzancy, and there, on the road running north-eastwards, was a place that was becoming very famous, Coblenz on the Rhine. People said Versailles had moved to Coblenz. Surely there was something in all this for Vidoche, the downtrodden and oppressed ? And now Vidoche had his plan, ripe and ready to be put into action. He would go in a day or two to the Mayor at Chauny with his tale. As further evidence, here was M. de Prémoncourt, come to fetch young M. de Vaudrelaine and the ladies to join their father, and only prevented from carrying out the scheme by the valiant M. Birros. Yes, the story hung together. Vidoche rubbed his hands with pleasure, and chuckled. He would go by night to Chauny, since he knew every path through the woods, and he would be back before anybody had missed him.

So tousel-headed Vidoche stole through the woods like a swift shadow in the early twilight of a May day, running for long spells, and then walking to recover his breath. Full darkness had soon fallen, and when he crossed the bridge into the town, and saw the reflexion of the moon in the water, he chuckled again, for he was happy and excited, like a child on the way to a party. But when he entered the town, he was walking slowly, like any decent citizen on his way home ; almost strolling, and humming a favourite air as he went. At the house of the Mayor he was told that M. Meilleries was supping with friends at the Golden Arrow. The woman who gave him this information spared no pains to indicate that she did not like the look of him. But nobody had ever liked the look of him, and he was not disturbed. Things were going to be different in future. So he thanked the woman with such an oily smirk that she set him down as a half-wit, and closed the door on him

THE GASCON

hastily. He went off again down the street and presently came to the hostelry of the Golden Arrow, standing on a corner, with its sign-board hanging motionless in the still air, and in its ample yard a great coming and going of serving-men, wenches and horse-boys. He ambled into the main room, where the local people and one or two travellers were eating and drinking. And, feeling that his new life had begun already, he put what he thought was something of a swagger into his walk, albeit, inside him, there was hesitation and ill-ease. He saw nobody who looked like a mayor, so he cried loudly to a girl who was carrying two wine-cups: "Ho! Mistress Rosy-Cheeks, conduct me, I pray you, to his honour the Mayor."

The maid set down the cups and, with arms akimbo and legs well apart, regarded him so fiercely that he became, upon the instant, poor Vidoche the scullion again, down-trodden and oppressed. Sure of her audience, the girl did not spare him.

"Look then," she said, "'tis the Seigneur des Egouts who has dismounted from his calèche to honour our humble inn. And what is the pleasure of my Lord of the Sewers? Why, he has come to offer an abbey to the Mayor of Chauny." Then she put out her tongue at him, and said: "Aristocrat!"

A roar of laughter greeted her sally, and she stood mocking him. And Vidoche said humbly, in his own voice, and with his own hangdog look: "I would have a word with the Mayor, if I do not disturb him."

"Upon what business?" asked the landlord, summoned by the uproar in the room.

Vidoche turned and moved very close to him. "Upon important business of the State," said Vidoche.

"Who are you and where do you come from?"

"I am from the Mayor of Soissons," said Vidoche, suddenly inspired, "with a letter."

The landlord looked him up and down, and scratched

THE DUEL

his head. Nothing seemed more unlikely than this story, until he remembered that in these days strange messengers were used, and that it was no longer safe to go by appearances.

"The Mayor," he said, "is at supper in the room above. I will have a word with him. Your name?"

"Gervais Riautour," said Vidoche, and added: "The People's Friend."

As the landlord turned to go, a man at a bench in a dark corner of the room, but a few feet from where Vidoche stood waiting, huddled closer into the wall and pulled his broad-brimmed hat down over his eyes. He had heard the latter part of the conversation, when Vidoche had ceased to whisper, and had listened with an interest which grew into amazement. He had recognized the scullion from Vaudrelaine, a lout whose looks he had never liked, but he clearly had reasons for not being recognized in his turn. "Oho!" he said to himself, "what is our friend up to? I think this is my business also." Armand Birros — for it was he — waited until the landlord had returned to say that the Mayor was at the service of M. Riautour, if he would give himself the trouble to join him upstairs. Vidoche left the room, following the landlord. The latter returned to some other part of the house and, when all was quiet outside in the passage, Birros rose casually, walked out of the room, and made for the door which led into the yard. Then he turned, walked on tiptoe down the passage again, and up the stairs. Behind the closed door that faced him he heard voices and the scraping of chairs. The next door to the left was half-open, and he saw, by the moonlight flooding in at a window, a small, almost bare room. He went in, locked the door on the inside, and listened at the partition wall. He heard only vague sounds. The wall was too thick for him to overhear any conversation. With a curse he looked about him, and in a moment noticed a tall cupboard let into the wall. The door was open and it was empty, and when he had crept into it he realized that

THE GASCON

he was now some inches nearer the room where the Mayor sat. By putting his ear close to the wall, he could hear every word uttered. As he settled himself into position, taking care to move quietly, he heard a deep voice saying : " Then who the devil are you, and what the devil do you here ? "

When the landlord opened the door of the room at the head of the stairs, and left Vidoche on the threshold, the scullion stood hesitating. He saw before him a big table laden with pasties and roasts and bottles. At this table were seated half a dozen men of the comfortable, solid, middle-class kind. At the head of the table, facing the door, was a fat, good-natured man of middle age, but vigorous for all his contented look.

" Well, well, come in man ! What ails you ? " said this gentleman impatiently.

" I seek the Mayor," said poor Vidoche. " Upon important matters," he added, as he saw all those eyes staring in surprise.

Nobody spoke.

" Which of you gentlemen is the Mayor ? " asked Vidoche.

" What is the Mayor's name, Monsieur Riautour ? " asked an elderly thin-lipped man.

Vidoche had forgotten the name.

" I seek the Mayor," he repeated foolishly.

" 'Cré nom ! " said the fat man at the head of the table.

" So you are Monsieur Riautour, bearing a letter from the Mayor of Soissons, whose name you shall tell us presently, and you do not know the Mayor of Chauny by sight, nor so much as his name. What name does your letter bear ? "

Vidoche saw that he must act quickly.

" I have no letter, sir," he answered, " nor am I from the Mayor of Soissons, nor can my name be truly said to be Riautour."

THE DUEL

"Then who the devil are you, and what the devil do you here?" roared the Mayor, pushing back his chair. "I, sir, am the Mayor, Monsieur Meilleries. You will explain at once your assumed name and the reason for your effrontery in disturbing me and my friends at such an hour. Come, what is this lunacy?"

"It was necessary," said Vidoche, "to invent something, that I might be brought to you. My business is for your ear, not the landlord's. My name is Pierre Vidoche."

"Your business?" snapped Meilleries.

Vidoche was beginning to feel better. He straightened himself, cleared his throat, and stepped further into the room.

"Where is the Marquis de Vaudrelaine?" began Vidoche.

And at that there was an exclamation, followed by laughter.

A voice said, "The fellow's mad as old Grégoire."

"Is that the State business you come upon?" asked Meilleries.

"Yes," said Vidoche bluntly, still angry at his reception.

"He bears a letter to the Marquis," said the grey-haired man next to the Mayor.

There was more laughter.

"He is in Paris, is he not?" said Vidoche.

"Before you ask further riddles," said Meilleries, "allow me to inform you that it is none of my business and, more surely still, none of yours, where the Marquis is. And now, if that is all, perhaps you will leave us. I——"

But here a swarthy man with watchful eyes, and a keen intelligent face, who had so far observed the scene quietly, intervened.

"One moment, Meilleries, by your leave. It is not inconceivable that the whereabouts of the Marquis might be our business. There are stories."

The Mayor, who appeared to be in some consternation, argued with this dark man in a low voice, but evidently to

THE GASCON

no purpose. A voice said : " Dutailis is right."

" You, Vidoche," said Dutailis, " what exactly are you getting at ? "

Vidoche, feeling that he had an ally at last, took the floor in earnest. " The Marquis is supposed to be in Paris," he said. " But he went there by the road to the frontier. He was seen in . . ." (Vidoche had forgotten the name of the place) " — at a place near the frontier, going in the direction of Coblenz."

" Who saw him, and where ? " asked Dutailis.

" I forget the name, but I have seen it on a map," replied Vidoche. " A soldier at Heudeval, in the village, saw him."

" What was the soldier's name and where is he now ? " asked Dutailis.

" I never knew his name. He was passing through. I do not know where he is now."

Dutailis looked disappointed.

" Does that satisfy you ? " asked Meilleries, with a grin. " Somebody, unknown, is said to have seen the Marquis at an unknown place on this side of the frontier. Therefore he cannot be in Paris."

One or two laughed, but the rest were not satisfied.

" And how do you come into all this, my friend ? " asked the grey-haired man, whom they called Enquieu. " What is your interest in the Marquis ? "

" I am in the service of the Marquis at Vaudrelaine," said Vidoche.

" To spy upon him ? " suggested the Mayor.

But Vidoche had by now aroused interest.

" There is more to tell," he said, avoiding the eyes of the Mayor and addressing Dutailis, whom he regarded as his supporter. But before he could continue, there was a knock on the door. The landlord put his head round timidly, and said, " Your pardon, gentlemen, it is——"

" Chassaviel," said a raucous voice, and there strode in a tall, lean-faced young man, in dusty clothes, and with

THE DUEL

lank fair hair framing his pallid features. He might have posed as a symbol of Hunger — not only of physical hunger, to which such men grow almost indifferent, but also of that racking hunger of the soul for vengeance on society ; but not of the noble hunger for justice, which gives to the tattered and the broken a majestic dignity. It was obvious that his presence was unwelcome in that room. For he brought with him the clamour and the violence of the streets, the accent of the mob — everything which threatened to carry the middle-class Revolution out of its depths, and so drown it in blood. Even Dutailis, who was, in that company, an extremist, resented his incursion. But not even Dutailis dared express his distaste by more than silence. A spectator would have said they were all afraid of Chassaviel, and that was sufficiently near the truth. A seer, or perhaps a poet, might have read in those burning eyes the doom of the Monarchy and the degradation of the Committee's system of martial law into an instrument of butchery. André Chénier would have recognized in that sinister figure the dishonour of a noble idea. Something of this the company in that room apprehended, as though the man before them were no mere man but fear clothed with a human personality ; as though he were the very substance of their secret troubles and anxieties. He knew they disliked him, but he lacked subtlety or wit to taunt them. His nature was simple and direct.

“ A cup of wine, big-face,” he cried to a heavy-jowled man at the table.

He drained it greedily and set it on the mantelshelf above the hearth. There he leaned, his dirty old cloak drawn close about him, and a greasy, shapeless hat on his head. From small brown eyes, sharp as those of an animal of the woodland, he darted glances at the assemblage. “ My business with you, *Sieur Meilleries*, can wait. What is toward ? You look like a pack of whipped curs.”

None was anxious for a continuation of Vidoche's story,

THE GASCON

since Chassaviel's reputation was well known locally. But Vidoche, scenting a second ally, needed no bidding to continue.

"If the Marquis is still in France," he said, "why do the ladies at Vaudrelaine talk so anxiously of a letter that is to come? The woman Trésille, she who was their nurse, could doubtless say why she has arranged their clothes for a journey. The journey might be to Paris, and it might not. A few days gone, he of Prémoncourt arrives in great haste. There is discussion, a family council. He of Prémoncourt has the plans for that journey. He has come to carry off the young master and his sisters to Paris, by way of the Rhine. But wait. Everybody is laughing and gay. Wine is drunk to the success of the journey. But they have reckoned without Monsieur Birros. He is cunning, that one. He strides up with a 'Whither now, my friends?' 'To Paris,' says he of Prémoncourt, trembling and pale. 'It's a lie,' replies that Birros. 'Very well,' says the other, 'to wherever we please.' The ladies are clinging together and weeping. And at that moment out drops a letter from the Prémoncourt pocket. That Birros seizes it. 'From Coblenz, I see,' says he very calmly. 'Stand back!' cries Prémoncourt. But for answer Birros draws. Prémoncourt draws. They fight. Tic-toc, to-and-fro, in-and-out, up-and-down, round-and-round, until Prémoncourt falls pierced in a hundred places. The ladies shriek and hide their eyes. 'There will be no journey to Paris,' says that Birros, wiping his blade carefully on the fallen body of his foe. And there lies Prémoncourt at this moment, in a great bedroom at the castle, to prove my words."

When Vidoche had finished speaking, Chassaviel moved to the table, filled a cup with wine, and handed it to him. There was a gleam in Chassaviel's eyes.

"Well, Mayor," he said briskly, "there's something for you to chew. Right under your nose these impudent dogs — well, what do you say?"

THE DUEL

Meilleries no longer looked fat and comfortable. He was angry.

"All this that you have told us," he said to Vidoche, "you of course witnessed yourself. Where did it take place?"

"I have told you — at the castle."

"The castle is a big expression. What part of it? In the kitchens?"

"No."

"Then where were you when it took place?"

"In the room with them."

"How — in the room with them? Is that your place?"

"I was in the room, I tell you, hidden behind a screen."

"And you saw the letter fall?"

"There was a hole in the screen."

"And they fought there, in that room?"

"No. They went out to an inner court. I followed, and hid in a doorway."

The Mayor shrugged his shoulders. "My friend," he said, "I do not believe your story."

There were murmurs at the table, and then Chassaviel stepped forward. "But I believe his story," he said. "It is easy, with a few tricks of the notary, to fog a man's mind and catch him out. I know these dirty little legal games. It is the substance of the story that concerns us, not what room they were in, or the colour of somebody's cloak. I know these people, and have watched them. They all work together. They are all damned aristocrats, to be hunted like rats."

"If this fellow's story is doubtful," said Dutailis, "it can be verified. It should be easy to find out whether de Prémoncourt is at the castle, wounded."

"We have no right," said Enquieu, "to suspect the Marquis of anything on such flimsy evidence."

"All such men," shouted Chassaviel, "are suspect from the moment of their birth."

THE GASCON

One or two voices were raised in disapproval.

"You are all too goose-livered and half-hearted for the new times," said Chassaviel. "You think that Providence sends a Revolution like this to provide you and your guzzling friends with fat purses and good positions. If you continue in that delusion, you will be torn limb from limb, like the noblemen. While you sit in a room, still under the spell of a proud name which has enslaved men and women for centuries, better men are working to destroy this foul race of tyrants. Remember your fathers. *They* were not soft and contented like you. But because you have escaped want and misery you are beginning to think like the vile sots in the Tuileries. If you were not shameless in your infamy, your bowels would rot away at the thought of what you are doing. Learn, imbeciles, that there are no innocent aristocrats. You, my lord Meilleries, can do what you please in this matter. I, for my part, intend to pursue it further."

"You encroach upon my authority," said the Mayor, with what dignity he could.

"Oh, yes," said Chassaviel, with a wild laugh. "To be sure. I encroach upon your authority, and to the devil with it and you! As for you, my lad" — he turned to Vidoche — "I think we are going to understand each other."

Vidoche's eyes were starting out of his head. Never had he heard such music as this ranter's speech. He wished it had gone on longer. He had no idea who Chassaviel was, nor whether he had any official position, but quite clearly he spoke in this room as one who commanded. And his words! His words! They set a tune for his heart to dance to.

"I had nearly forgot my business here," said Chassaviel, and paused as he sat down.

And to fill that pause came a crash, so close that it seemed to be in the room. They all stared at the wall, from which the sound had come. Then they rose in a body, dashed

THE FLIGHT

from the room, and stopped on the landing to listen. They heard no more, but one of them tried the door of the room into which Birros had gone. It was locked. Meilleries cried: "Who is within?" There was no answer. "Break in the door," cried Chassaviel. Someone handed him a chair from the room for a battering-ram, and he swung this weapon, while the others gathered behind him, and the landlord came tumbling up the stairs to know what the excitement portended.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FLIGHT

BIRROS, cramped in his cupboard, had listened to all that had taken place, at first with amusement, and then with concern. For a moment he had thought to come out of his hiding-place, burst into the room, and give the lie roundly to Vidoche's balderdash. But he had heard, like most people in the neighbourhood, of this Chassaviel, and it occurred to him that the lies of the scullion had placed him in an admirable position to help the Vaudrelaine family, provided he kept his head and did nothing rashly. So he checked the impulse to interfere, and considered rapidly how best to use his new reputation as the man who had prevented the flight from Vaudrelaine. The Mayor would not be difficult to deal with, but Chassaviel was another matter altogether. And when he heard him say, "I, for my part, intend to pursue it further," he knew that there was no time to be lost. The Vaudrelaines must be warned, and must be clear of Heudeval before Chassaviel could get to work. Hardly breathing, he began to edge his way out of the cupboard. The moonlight flooding the room would

THE GASCON

guide him to the door. Noiselessly he stepped clear of the cupboard. But he pushed the door too wide. It swung back with a creak, and overturned a chair which he had not seen. He did not wait to find out whether the men in the next room had heard the noise, but sprang to the window and looked out. He saw, some thirty feet below him, a yard which he knew to be near the stables. But, better, he saw to his left a kind of penthouse roof within easy reach of the window at which he stood. The moonlight was bright, but there seemed to be nobody in the yard. He pushed open the window, threw one leg and then the other over the sill, and dropped to the roof as quietly as possible. From the roof he jumped to the ground, ran round the corner of the yard, and made for the stall where his horse had fed. He met nobody but a gaping boy, to whom he tossed a coin, and while the din was still going on behind him, he rode out by a back alley, and was soon clear of Chauny and across the river. He galloped for the woods, looking back frequently, but there was no sign of pursuit. Yet he did not slacken, and in spite of the trouble in his mind, the physical exhilaration of action banished all care from his broad face. Crossing bars of darkness and splashes of moonlight between the tall trees, he came to the hovels of Heudeval, and breathed his horse on the hill that led up to the castle.

He stood on no ceremony when the door was opened to him. He had seen lights in the tall windows on the ground floor, and he pushed the waiting-man aside and strode unannounced into the midst of a startled family. Antoinette was at the spinet, playing and singing softly for her own amusement. By the fire Michel was teasing a large hound. Gabrielle was embroidering.

Michel sprang to his feet. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "Have you not brought enough mischief among us?"

The echo of Antoinette's song was still in the air, but

THE FLIGHT

she sat erect and stiff, watching him. He knew that she was reproaching him for being indiscreet enough to force his way in at such an hour, and after what had happened. He felt the cold hostility of Michel, and the disdain of Gabrielle, as they all waited for an explanation. And, before he could speak, somebody whom he had not seen, moved at the far end of the room, and Félicien de Prémontcourt came out of the shadows, holding his right arm bent, with the hand thrust into his coat.

"I deeply regret the necessity for this intrusion," Birros said, and, looking at Michel, he added: "And I must ask you to believe, Monsieur, that my only justification is the desire to prevent far worse mischief than any you suspect. I come from Chauny, where one of your men, Vidoche, has been telling a diabolically clever story to the local authorities."

"Vidoche!" exclaimed Michel. "Impossible! And in any case Meilleries would not listen to the first rogue who came to prattle about his master's affairs."

"Here is no question of Meilleries," said Birros. "Chassaviel, of whom you have no doubt heard, was there. But I will tell you briefly what I have come to say, in order that you may take your own decision."

Whereupon Birros related all that had occurred at the Golden Arrow, with his own part in it. They listened to him without interruption, and when he had finished Félicien was the first to speak.

"There is still an obscurity," he said. "Even were we to suppose that every word spoken by this rascal were true, what position, what authority does Chassaviel hold that would give him warrant to take matters into his own hands? What can he hope to effect by threatening us?"

Birros raised his eyebrows at what he considered to be a display of astounding ignorance.

"To-day," he replied with a smile, "position and authority may be usurped by any enterprising cut-throat.

THE GASCON

Such men as Chassaviel need no warrant for what they do. Nor do they stop at threats."

"In heaven's name, man!" said Michel, "be plain. What is it you fear for us?"

Birros glanced at the ladies. "If you wish me to speak plainly," he said, "I will do so. I fear for this castle the fate of a dozen such castles. The men who follow Chassaviel, Monsieur, are the kind of men you have seen in Paris. My advice to you is that you fly this very night — no matter where. I, as the hero of Vidoche's story, will remain to hold them off from pursuit, or to put them on a false scent."

"I had thought," said Michel, "that you had some sympathy with these revolutionaries."

"Wherever my sympathies may lie," Birros replied, "they do not permit me to stand aside and watch my friends being betrayed."

There then began a general discussion. Michel, who could not say outright that he thought there was more behind this than met the eye, decided that they must remain at Vaudrelaine. He maintained that to fly from such men as Chassaviel was not only the act of fools and cowards, but would be as good as an admission of guilt in the eyes of the whole neighbourhood. He thought that Birros overestimated the power of Chassaviel, and, consequently, the peril in which they stood. He also thought — but of this he said nothing — that Birros had some end of his own to serve in the course he was pressing upon them. Félicien, who thought only of the safety of the ladies, was convinced of the honesty of Birros, and recalled what the Marquis de Villers-Molain had said of him: "Any part he has in the present disturbances is likely to be for the fun of the thing." So Félicien supported Birros, and urged the necessity for immediate departure.

"Michel," said Gabrielle, "will best serve our cause in Paris and not here in the country. Monsieur Birros has shown himself our friend by coming here to-night. I think

THE FLIGHT

we should take his advice. We can be away before morning. Antoinette and I will go to our aunt, Madame de Mardecques, in Paris."

But Antoinette had something to say and, with flashing eyes and impatient gestures, she said it: "My father would be proud of his family at this moment! Since when did a Vaudrelaine fly in panic from the first mongrel that yapped? It seems that I should have been the man of the family. Then there would have been one of us to confront this insolent dog and his rabble. I do not leave my home at the bidding of this Chassaviel."

Birros had watched her admiringly. So would he have a girl speak. His instinct was to reply, "Aye, we'll remain, the two of us." But he knew the danger that was approaching.

"She is right," said Michel, half convinced that Birros and Antoinette were playing a prearranged part. "She is right. She and I will stay."

"There can be no question," said Félicien, "of your sisters remaining here. You, Michel, could please yourself, were there some other escort available for them. I, alas, for the moment have no sword-arm. Monsieur Birros must stay to delay Chassaviel or send him away. Therefore, only you can escort the ladies to Paris."

It was Birros who ended the discussion. By opposing Antoinette, he showed Michel that there was no plot between them; and the girl was overborne and consented to go. Michel went out to give the necessary orders, and his sisters to prepare for the journey. In the doorway Gabrielle turned back.

"You, Félicien," she said, "do you ride with us to Paris?"

"I! I am an embarrassment whatever I do," answered Félicien. "I cannot stay here with Monsieur Birros, whose bitter enemy I am supposed to be. Nor am I of any use, in my present condition, as an escort for you ladies. I think I will ride back to Prémoncourt."

THE GASCON

"They will hunt you down," said Gabrielle.

"Then Monsieur Birros can tell them that he found me gone — in the opposite direction." A great longing was upon him for the woods of his home and for the room filled with books, where he might forget that Antoinette had spoken no word to him, beyond the common courtesies, during the days he had been under her father's roof, healing his wounded arm.

"Indeed," said Birros, "since lying is evidently to be my new trade, the more practice I have in that difficult art the better for my future. Monsieur de Prémoncourt, fearing my absence in Chauny meant trouble, seized the opportunity to get the family away, as it seems, and also himself. But one of the men about the place, or in the village, noted that Monsieur de Prémoncourt did not accompany the family. He took a different road. And that tale will set them wrangling on what to do next. And the wrangling will gain valuable time, and give me a chance to tell yet more and weightier lies."

"But suppose they suspect you of double-dealing, Monsieur?" said Gabrielle.

"You forget, Mademoiselle, that, to save his own dirty skin, Vidoche will have to go very carefully with me. One word from him, and I can expose his story, and leave him to his new-found friends. I think he will find it convenient to persuade them of my honesty, whatever I say."

When Gabrielle had withdrawn, and the two men were left together, Birros, with a beaming smile, said: "Monsieur, I hope you bear me no ill-will for the unfortunate issue of our bout."

"On the contrary, Monsieur," said Félicien, "I have but my own hot-headed folly to thank for my wound."

"Your Monsieur de Vaudrelaine was bent on a fight, and I was as firmly resolved not to please him. But, entrails of my entrails! you gave me no choice."

"I trust you will not impute it to idle curiosity if I

THE FLIGHT

ask where your sympathies really lie, in this quarrel which threatens to plunge our country into civil war."

"Monsieur," said Birros, "I am a man with his way to make in the world. In this quarrel I find good men and bad men on both sides, and good ideas and bad ideas on both sides, and, by the Bones of Saint Cheminastre, I'll be hanged if I know who is right and who is wrong. When I get within a mile of a courtier, I think the people are right. But when I hear the people yapping, I think the nobles are right. It is my conviction, Monsieur, that an honest man will take a middle course in these events that we are witnessing. There will be plenty of fighting, and fighting is the only human activity I know in which a man does not find himself hesitating over what to do. So I say, let others debate the questions of the hour, while I take what fighting comes to me."

"If you substitute for fighting the leading of one's own life quietly, I am in close agreement with you," said Félicien.

"That a swordsman of your skill should talk of living quietly is incomprehensible to me," replied Birros. "However, every man to his choice."

The preparations for the flight did not take long, thanks to old Marthe Trésille, who had been the girls' nurse. She knew that the family might at any hour be summoned by the Marquis, and she had made all possible arrangements, so that no valuable time should be wasted. She herself was dressed and ready before anybody else, and was chivying the men and women who carried the baggage to the waiting carriage. Michel was still surly. What Trésille called their departure was too much like a retreat, or even a rout. But he consoled himself with the thought that there was man's work to be done in Paris.

The moon had set, and the sky was heavy with slow clouds when the ladies came out of the house and the farewells were said. Félicien saw Birros move apart with Antoinette, and heard their gay laughter, and was still

THE GASCON

watching them when the voice of Gabrielle, beside him, said : " Care for your arm, Félicien, and no more fighting for a while." He thanked her for nursing him, and handed her into the carriage, where old Marthe had already established herself. Michel swung himself into the saddle, and walked his horse forward, crying, " A bientôt, Félicien ! " Félicien stepped back as the coachman spoke to his horses, and the last thing he saw was the white hand of Antoinette, in the open window of the carriage. " Adieu, Félicien," she cried to him, and then Birros stooped and kissed her hand, and the travellers and their servants started on their way. The sound of the wheels grew fainter as the carriage emerged from the avenue and took the cross-country road that led to the great highway and so to Compiègne and Senlis, and Paris.

The two men went back into the house.

" That sets me more at ease," said Birros. " I do not think Master Chassaviel and his fragrant companions will trouble us to-night, but there is no harm in being prepared. Do you, Monsieur, sleep, or do you take the road to Prémoncourt ? "

" Since I can be of no use here," said Félicien, " I will take the road. My horse is in the stable here, and I am well able to ride again. And all one has to do with Hercule is to sit on him and let him do the work."

" Doubtless our paths will cross again," said Birros, " and I hope that when we next meet we shall be fighting side by side. But, a moment. I had almost forgot. Before you go, I have a service to ask of you. It is that you bind my arms and legs with stout cord, and gag me effectively."

" An excellent idea, if they come soon and find you. But what if they delay, or do not come at all ? "

" By the Rock of Accous, the bonds that could hold me have never yet been discovered. You shall truss me like a fowl, and when my good friends arrive they shall hear me tapping and groaning, and I shall be so angry that they

THE FLIGHT

will be hard put to it to get any sense out of me. And all that will waste time. Meanwhile, let us drink, for lying gagged and bound is thirsty work."

So saying, Birros poured out wine from a silver flagon that stood handy upon a table of Spanish mahogany. "How thin are your northern wines!" he said. "In my valley, the valley of Aspe, there is real wine. I have drunk it since I caught my first eel in the river. Our wine is thick and dark and strong, and therefore a fitting companion for a salmis of pigeons, or a deep dish of tripotcha, or a poule au pot as Henry the Fourth ate it. But all wine is wine, and so down with it, and God be praised!"

From the stables, where Félicien saddled his horse, some rope was procured, and it was decided that Birros should seat himself as comfortably as possible on the floor of a small room on the left of the entrance. He instructed Félicien how to set to work, and his wrists and ankles were soon secured. The east was brightening when the gag was placed in position, and Félicien was ready to mount his horse and ride away from Vaudrelaine. Birros, unable to speak, grinned at him, and Félicien clapped his hand on the captive's shoulder and wished him well. He then mounted and rode off through the woods, slowly, and deep in thought. As the dawn strengthened, a great weariness, overcame him, and presently he saw a little dell of ferns guarded by tall beeches. Here he dismounted and, having tethered his horse to a bough, wrapped himself in his cloak and lay down to sleep. To sleep, and to dream. In his dream he saw Antoinette de Vaudrelaine, all light and grace, in the gardens of her home. But, as happens in dreams, she was in some way transfigured, so that he gazed not at the girl who came and went on this earth, but at the secret picture of her which he kept in his heart, the nearest thing to perfection he had ever found in the world. And then, as he looked, there came a sneer into her features, and she sang in a vulgar, strident voice an air which she

THE GASCON

was wont to sing, but to abominable words. This change was but a sudden flash, so that he said in his dream, "Bah ! It was my imagination." For, at once, it was again the face he knew, turned towards him as it had been turned in the old time, and he was seized with a great fear lest he should awaken too soon. It was clear to him now that this was a dream, and he knew that it must end, and be followed by bitterness and sorrow. Yet still she smiled and still he gazed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CITIZEN CHASSAVIEL HAS THE LAST WORD

CHASSAVIEL had not wasted his time. It was not much after eight o'clock in the morning when he and a handful of his cronies came hurrying up the avenue at Vaudrelaine. They were an unappetizing crew of ruffians, among whom the traitor Vidoche looked timid and uncertain, a mere apprentice to villainy. Beside Chassaviel strode a large man with a black beard, his brown shirt open at the neck, and in his right hand a massive club. Crowding behind him came half a dozen others, one of them so fortified with drink that he belched loudly as he advanced. The fiercest and the most debased of them all was a little fellow with a mat of black hair and a horrible squint, who sang a blood-thirsty song in a surprisingly beautiful tenor voice. All the men carried clubs, save Chassaviel, who had a brace of big pistols stuffed into a kind of dirty sash which he wore round his waist, as well as a long knife.

Chassaviel led the way up the steps to the great door and beat on it. When this brought no answer, the clubs

CITIZEN CHASSAVIEL HAS THE LAST WORD

were applied to it. But it was a stout door, and they might as well have torn at it with their fingers.

"They are all asleep," said the big man with the beard. "The rich do not go to bed till dawn."

Meanwhile Vidoche had slipped away and had got into the house by a way of his own. He now opened to them and they trooped in. Chassaviel held up his hand for silence. From the right came a sound as of someone knocking and pounding on the panelling of a wall. Vidoche flung open the door of the small room, and there lay Birros, trussed up and lashing at the wall with his bare feet. He was covered with dust and grime, his clothes were torn, and his red hair was in a wild disorder.

"And who in the Devil's name may you be?" shouted Chassaviel.

"It is that Monsieur Birros," said Vidoche.

The gag was removed and the ropes cut. Birros staggered to his feet with an oath, and began to fight his rearguard action, to cover the Vaudrelaine carriage.

"And who in the Devil's name are you?" he roared. "Entrails of my entrails! Tourri! By the beard of St. Arapoup! You are a fine pack of warlike fellows that come peeping and peering and mincing when all the fighting is over."

"All the fi——" began Chassaviel.

"Aha, and there I see my friend the excellent Vidoche. At least I thought him the friend of us all. But no doubt he said, 'Oh, Monsieur Birros can deal with the situation.' Well, Monsieur Birros can fight five men or ten men single-handed, but not twenty. A curse on the hour I set foot in this place. For I swear that since the day I left my own valley and the good, honest Béarnais, I have set eyes on nothing but intrigue and chicane, and have had my belly revolted by your mollicoddle milksop wines of the north, and your finicky dishes that wouldn't keep soul and body together in a poor tumbler. Fine hospitality!"

THE GASCON

"If you were to explain——" began Chassaviel again.

"Aye, slit me if I do not explain! I come here with letters from a great one in my countryside. I am well received. And then I find myself deep to the neck in a bog of treachery and whispering. Footsteps on the stairs, kerchiefs from turret windows, a long call on the hunting-horn, a coming and going, with masks, and gliding shadows in corridors, and a tapping on doors. Secret missives passed from hand to hand, thudding hoofs in the dead of night, a cry, a shot, and black looks. And——"

"Thunder of God!" shouted Chassaviel. "A truce to all this rambling folly! Explain, man!"

"It is a long story," said Birros, "and to condense it would but confuse you. There was but one man I recognized in all this medley of plotting. A hunchback of enormous strength, from the Charolais, an ill-favoured wretch with coarse black hair and a withered arm. I had seen him once in Chastellux, and knew him to be a creature of the night, lying long in the dirt to hear a word spoken or see a bolt drawn. What was he doing here? Well might I ask myself. What do I do? I confront him before them all. I say, 'One moment, beast of the fields! Have you forgotten the golden-haired woman of Chastellux, and the letter?' Ventreguienne! To see him turn yellow as an Angevin toad! To see him tremble! 'Come, little rat!' I continue. 'How do your dirty affairs prosper?' Well, at that, a lean giant of a fellow, all bone and neck and leg, springs up and flings the lees of his wine in my face. With——"

At that Blackbeard broke in. "There is but one thing we want to know," he said. "When did the birds fly, and whither?"

"You anticipate," said Birros. "But I will tell you. It was but shortly after dark that the company of horsemen arrived to escort them to Arlon. You could hardly expect me, one against forty, to hold them in play until you and

CITIZEN CHASSAVIEL HAS THE LAST WORD

your mangy crows arrived, with fierce looks and a parade of violence, and not even a horse between you."

"And what of this man you wounded — this Prémoncourt? Does he lie here still?"

"He has gone about his business — to Mende, as I understand."

"It is he who hatched the whole plot," said Vidoche. "It is he who lurked in the room at the inn to overhear all that was said. Thus was he able to warn them here. We shall find him at Prémoncourt."

"He never left the castle last night," said Birros.

"How should you know?" asked Chassaviel.

"He was among those who overpowered me," said Birros. "It was shortly after dark. When was Vidoche at the inn?"

"Just at that time," muttered Chassaviel.

Blackbeard took a hand again. "And you, friend, were you at the inn last night, by any chance?"

"I was, earlier in the evening."

"Indeed you were. The landlord saw you. Now if you had concealed yourself in the room at the inn, you might have overheard the talk, and so returned to warn your friends."

"And bound and gagged myself, too!" sneered Birros.

"Ah, that could be arranged," said Blackbeard.

"Doubtless," said Birros. "But you forget one thing. Vidoche here will tell you that it was I who retarded the flight by fighting him whom you call the ringleader, Prémoncourt. Did I not threaten, also, to have them all thrown into prison, Vidoche?"

"That's true," said Vidoche, realizing at once the trap he was in.

"Who the devil was in that room at the inn?" asked Chassaviel. "Somebody was there, and somebody warned these people to fly at once."

"Obviously one of the horsemen," said Birros.

THE GASCON

"What I say," cried Vidoche, "is that we should find Prémoncourt."

"And that's what I say," said the waspish little squinter.

"And I."

"And I."

Baulked of their quarry, they were all determined to give expression to their anger.

"You will come with us?" asked Chassaviel.

"What! To Mende?"

"It is easy to say one is going to Mende. Perhaps our man is on a shorter journey."

Birros saw hostility in the eyes that were staring at him. He moved casually closer to Chassaviel, the man who bristled with weapons. There was a pleasant smile on his face, but he knew the way things were going. He knew that not one of them trusted him. The customary exhilaration was upon him which always accompanied moments of decision and of danger. He appeared so merry that they thought he was laughing at them. Grinning, and seeming to move carelessly, he came a little closer to Chassaviel.

"We have wasted enough time," said Chassaviel. "We will go to Prémoncourt. And you, my friend Birros, will, of course, come with us."

This was delivered as an order, and Birros became more hilarious, and drew ever closer to Chassaviel.

"I?" he said gaily. "Oh, no."

They could not understand his manner, and so they resented it. They began to murmur. But Chassaviel held up his hand, and they fell silent.

Looking very ugly, Chassaviel approached Birros, until they were but a hand's breadth apart, which suited Birros very well.

"Did I understand you to say that you would not accompany us?" asked Chassaviel.

"Only you can answer for what your strictly limited intellect will allow you to grasp," said Birros, with a

CITIZEN CHASSAVIEL HAS THE LAST WORD

boisterous lift of his voice. "I certainly did say I would not come with you."

"And why?"

"I have seen enough of you and your friends," said Birros.

There were more murmurs. The belcher uttered a menace. The squinter spat. Blackbeard fondled his club.

"He is the friend of the Vaudrelaine people," said Vidoche, "and therefore of Prémoncourt."

"Softly, dear one," said Birros, "or you, and your friends, will not get a sight of that letter which Prémoncourt bore, and which is most important evidence. I think you saw me pick up that letter, Vidoche."

Vidoche nodded miserably.

"We will have that letter," said Chassaviel, holding out his hand.

"Naturally," said Birros, and made to take it from inside his cloak. Then, looking over Chassaviel's shoulder, he exclaimed: "Why, yonder——"

Chassaviel turned his head and, as he turned it, Birros had the two pistols out of his belt and sprang back a yard. Blackbeard, the most courageous of them, was for rushing at Birros with his club and chancing the consequences, but his friends held him back. Chassaviel took it better than any of them.

"You have tricked me cleverly," he said, "but I shall turn the tables on you, even if I have to go to Hell to find you."

"It is possible that you will even precede me there," said Birros, backing towards the stables, a pistol in each hand.

For a moment it looked as though the men would rush upon him in a body, and, without their leader, that is doubtless what they would have done. But Chassaviel shrugged his shoulders and bade his followers come out of danger's way. He turned, trailing the rope which had bound Birros, and walked away past the house, and along

THE GASCON

a path which led through the woods, by the shortest cut, to Prémoncourt. Birros, as he saddled his horse, could see him through a small dusty window in the stables, and by the time they had all disappeared round a bend he was ready to start for Prémoncourt. He rode warily at first, fearing an ambush, and, as he approached the bend in the path and heard no voices, he became more certain that he was riding into a trap. But he remembered that there was little undergrowth at the sides of the path, and only tree-trunks for cover, and that the only weapons the men had were knives. So, with the reins in his left hand, and one of the pistols in the other, he set spurs to his horse and broke into a gallop. Even as he swept round the bend he came on them. They were in a compact group some feet from the edge of the path, and he saw the flash of a knife as Chassaviel threw. It whistled past his head at the moment he fired, and Chassaviel uttered a cry and spun round with his hand clapped to the side of his head. What Birros had not seen was the rope stretched taut, between two trees, across the path, some feet from the ground. It caught his horse above the knees, and Birros was thrown head first against a tree, and stunned. While he lay senseless where he had fallen, Chassaviel, his face covered with blood, searched his clothes for the letter — which, of course, he did not find — and took back his pistols. He shot the horse, poor Houloubourrade, which was writhing and plunging in agony, with a broken neck, and then he and his party hastened away.

Félicien was awakened by the sun shining in his eyes, and he judged midday to be near. He brushed himself down with his hands, set his hat on his head, mounted, and rode on slowly. Without thinking of the matter, he had taken a path which would bring him out of the woods and on to the crest of a hill which overhung Prémoncourt. It was a place to which he had often come with his father,

CITIZEN CHASSAVIEL HAS THE LAST WORD

and familiar to him from early boyhood. "It is a good thing," his father had once said to him, "not to be a poet. For a poet, looking on his home and his land, is for ever sighing and reminding himself that nothing in human life endures. But a man of common sense takes the good things of life and enjoys them, without worrying overmuch that they are transitory." And as he now rode up the far slope of the hill, through the shining trees, Félicien thought again how little he had inherited in the way of temperament from the atheist soldier who lived in the moment and for the moment, and had died jesting; and how much from his gentle mother, devout, cultured, and for ever a mystery to her matter-of-fact husband. When he had crested the hill, he reined in and looked at the familiar sight beneath him, the deep woods, the small and humble dwellings of the village, and the great grey house at the end of the avenue. And as he gazed, he started in the saddle and exclaimed aloud. The wing of the house furthest from him was enveloped in a haze, but presently, when a little breeze blew, he saw that it was drifting smoke, and he could make out the figures of men running to and fro. They were pushing hay-carts against the doors and scrambling in and out of the windows. Little flames leaped from the carts and, as he watched, a sheet of flame billowed from a window, and there was the sound of a crash and of shouting. Smoke came from more than one of the windows, and as he rode down the hill and drew nearer, he could hear the crackling of burning wood and the thud of falling beams and masonry. He was aware also that there was fighting in progress, and that his servants were doing their best to interfere with the work of destruction. As he came through a side gate to the open space in front of the burning building, his horse stumbled over a body. Dismounting, he saw that it was the old manservant Bavart, with a hideous wound in his stomach. He was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS!

It was high summer in the year 1791. Mirabeau, the last hope of the Monarchy, had died three months before. The King and Queen had been captured at Varennes in June. Mme. de Mardecques sat with her nieces, Gabrielle and Antoinette, in the large and gracious drawing-room of her house in the rue d'Aguesseau. She was a tall handsome woman in the middle fifties, the widow of an officer of the Nancy garrison. The girls, though not understanding fully the implications of the death of Mirabeau, had been infected by their aunt's consternation. She indeed had seemed to be under a shock that might have been caused by a personal bereavement, and had answered the questions of her nieces in absent-minded fashion. At last Gabrielle had asked her why the death of a man known to be playing a double game should be treated with such seriousness. Then Mme. de Mardecques heaved a deep sigh.

"My dearest child," she said, "it is exactly because he was playing a double game that the blow was such a mortal one. The people thought he was leading them into their new world, and so trusted him, to a certain extent. The King and Queen thought he was serving them, and so trusted him a little. And both were right to trust him — but not too much, for he had the genius — and he alone had it — which could effect a compromise. He could use his power with the Court to get certain concessions made to the people, and his power with the people to save something of the system which has made the greatness of our country."

"Aunt," said Antoinette, "are you sure that his sole concern was not his own pocket? Or perhaps his own power?"

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS !

Gabrielle uttered an impatient exclamation. "Félicien," she said, "has been in a better position than any of us to know what was going on. He says that Monsieur de Mirabeau's chief object was to preserve the Monarchy and the system without the abuses which had driven the people to revolt."

"Félicien," said Antoinette, "will end up in the streets as a revolutionary. He thinks that people like us deserve what we are getting."

"That is an unjust way of putting it," said Mme. de Mardecques. "Félicien is profoundly honest — with himself and with everybody else. He has read too much subversive literature, and has formed for himself a poet's idea of the downtrodden peasants. But since he returned to Paris, and has had first-hand experience of his Revolution, he is not so sure of his theories. He has seen the King and Queen in captivity, for they are now prisoners, as we all know, in spite of gracious permission from the sovereign people to remain at the Tuileries. However, my dear girls, I will now read you the letter which your father has sent to me. It affects our future, and there is a decision to be taken."

The girls composed themselves to attend, and their aunt read the following letter :

"MY DEAREST SISTER,

"Since I last wrote to you circumstances have arisen which make it more desirable than before that you and my daughters should join me as soon as possible. Condé is at Worms, and is convinced that the blow which we must strike cannot long be delayed. It is now possible to organize our forces, since more and more officers are leaving France. Their men, of course, are revolutionaries, but, deprived of leadership, they will become a mere Jacobin mob. The other day there was a mutiny at Wissembourg, and a score of officers of the Beauvaisis regiment crossed the Rhine. That kind of thing is going on everywhere. As you know, the Assembly, as it calls

THE GASCON

itself, I believe, now allows soldiers to go to these Jacobin clubs. When will the fools who are trying to abolish the Monarchy realize that chaos in the Army will mean chaos all over the country, since life and property will be at the mercy of the mob? I understand that La Quéville, who is in Brussels, has written to Michel, urging upon him the importance of getting as many officers as possible to leave France. Michel himself is determined to remain at his post, and I sympathize with his contention that there must be officers left to command such troops as remain loyal, and to protect, if necessary, the lives of the King and the Queen. Everywhere one goes here, one meets French officers from all the regiments. Many are already with the Austrian army, and the deplorable tragedy of Varennes has accelerated the emigrations. Almost all the officers of the Artois-Dragons and the Chasseurs de Flandre are with us, and the Infanterie-Viennois brought the flags of the regiment with them. One who has recently seen Bouillé, an officer of the Royal-Suédois (and a son of my old friend Chérouanne) told me that, in Bouillé's opinion, the army, as a striking force, no longer exists, and that the loyal elements left in France can do nothing by themselves. Our duty, therefore, the duty of us who are over the frontier, is to organize a force as rapidly as possible. Condé hoped much from Lieutard, who was in touch with Mirabeau, and even sent 100,000 livres, but something misfired in Marseilles. And we had another disappointment over Lyons. Jarjayes was at Turin, from the Queen, and everything was ready for an armed entry into France. Mirabeau-Tonneau was to march by Porrentruy to Lyons. Artois was to move, too. But apparently we were betrayed, and the King sent Bourcet to Artois, commanding him to postpone any action he contemplated. It was after that that Condé came to Worms and organized the officers who emigrated. Artois went to Venice, where the Polignac welcomed him, and, more important for him, the vile Mme. de Pollastron. Meanwhile, we are no longer at sixes and sevens. Fersen made matters worse in urging the King and Queen to escape, by telling them that if they were rescued by us, we should be masters of France — as though we were acting to serve our own base interests! But now everybody sees that it is a question of coming to the aid of the King and Queen as speedily as possible.

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS !

If only Mirabeau had lived ! Breteuil told me that it was by his insistence that the King's sisters were allowed to continue their journey to Turin when they had been arrested at Arnay-le-Duc. Artois has arrived in Coblenz with his following. The accounts of affairs in France given by the latest arrivals are appalling, which is what makes me so anxious for you, my sister, and for my daughters. I find myself in agreement with Mme. de Montregard who, when somebody spoke of the 'abuses' of the old days, replied : ' Les abus ? Mais c'est ce qu'il y avait de mieux.' I think it will be best for you to come to Coblenz, but I will write to you further and with detailed instructions in a day or two. Bernot, who will bring this letter, is the soul of reliability, and if Michel has business of importance which will make his presence at the Tuileries necessary, someone as trustworthy must be found to escort the three of you. More of that later. I send you, my dear sister, my warmest embraces, and I kiss my two daughters.

" Your brother,
" ROBERT."

There was a silence in the room after Mme. de Mardecques had finished reading the letter. She looked from one girl to the other, and was perhaps struck by the contrast in them. The old Marquis de Villers-Molain had called them Day and Night.

Antoinette was the first to speak. " It was thought prudent," she said, showing her contempt for the word, " that we should leave our home, in case our presence at Vaudrelaine should incommode the sovereign people. And now my father thinks it prudent that we should leave our country for the same reason. Have we no will to direct our own lives ? "

" We are women, dear child," said Mme. de Mardecques. " If we remain here we shall be thrown into prison. I would rather leave my country until it is a safe place to live in."

" Our aunt is right," said Gabrielle. " And we must do whatever our father wishes."

THE GASCON

"Our immediate duty," said Mme. de Mardecques, "is to be certain that no hint of our intentions be allowed to bring not only us but your father also into danger. No word of all this must go further than this room. In a few days we shall receive our final instructions. We can trust your father to take every precaution on his side."

"All the more reason," said Antoinette, "why we should not fall into a panic."

"There is no question of panic," said her aunt. "But our imprisonment would not help the King and Queen."

"Michel says," continued Antoinette, "that the King cannot look out of a window at the Tuileries without seeing armed National Guards walking about like jailers. The Queen is watched if she walks down a flight of stairs. Even the Dauphin is watched, and his mother is barely allowed to see him alone. Why does not Condé move, or Bouillé? Or the Queen's brother?"

"Bouillé has tried once," replied Gabrielle, "and failed. You are as impatient as the Queen. Be assured the Emperor will choose his moment, and do nothing rashly. They say that Fersen is at work, too. A threat of invasion at the right time will do everything. You will see the Revolution collapse, and we shall be home again sooner than you think."

So they had waited for further instructions from the Marquis de Vaudrelaine, which did not arrive. And then, in September, the King accepted the Constitution, and many said openly that the Revolution was completed, and that France would still have her Monarchy. The streets were illuminated, there were firework displays, the Queen was acclaimed at the Opera, the King was cheered in the gardens of his Palace. News of all this excitement passed across the frontiers and brought many *émigrés* back to their homes. And a letter from the Marquis de Vaudrelaine said that it might be better to wait a while and see what would happen next. The new Assembly met in the autumn and

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS !

at once the most optimistic noticed that the acceptance of the Constitution had meant nothing. As the year drew to a close the talk was all of war. The energy and rhetoric of the young Girondins were bound to triumph over the dry common sense of Robespierre. The Declaration of Pillnitz made plain the intentions of Prussia and Austria, and established, in the eyes of those in France who called for war, the treachery of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Michel reported in the rue d'Aguesseau that it would not come to war, because the revolutionary leaders would give way to threats, but that if it did come to war, there would be a mere punitive expedition against France, and the whole affair would be over in a week. "War," he said, "is a business of armies, and France no longer has an army." Armand Birros, an occasional visitor, said : "Ultimately a revolution is settled by arms. The men of the Gironde are right. This quarrel can only be settled by fighting." But it was not until he said in the plainest language that though both sides wanted war, the Prussians and Austrians, urged on by the *émigrés*, were the provokers, that Mme. de Mardecques gave him to understand that his opinions made him unwelcome. And since Antoinette was tiring of the flirtation and was quite sincere in her loathing of all who had a good word for the Revolution, Birros discontinued his visits and consoled himself with a ravishingly beautiful lady in the rue du Théâtre Français, who had no politics. As for Félicien de Prémoncourt, Antoinette usually left the room when he arrived, although he made every attempt to avoid argument. This was the more difficult since her sister Gabrielle would question him closely, as though making a genuine effort to understand his point of view. For long months Félicien was a man at war with himself, and could find no ease for his mind outside that room where the grave girl who disagreed with him so profoundly was willing to listen to him, and even to discuss the situation with him. Mme. de Mardecques, who could read the

THE GASCON

heart of her niece, always left them alone, and even hoped that Gabrielle might succeed in arresting the growing admiration of Félicien for men whom she considered vile and insincere.

After war had been declared, and news of the preposterous action on the frontier had arrived, with an account of the panic of the undisciplined French troops at the appearance of a handful of Austrian hussars, Antoinette laughed. "Here is the war your Girondins wanted," she said. "No," said Félicien, "it is the war they preferred to humiliation. The Austrian army is a foreign army, trying to dictate terms to France." Gabrielle said: "But how can these untrained troops hope to resist?" "We have not seen the end yet," said Félicien. When the Assembly decided to establish a camp of 20,000 troops outside Paris, to protect the capital from the invaders, the King used his veto. "Everything he does," said Félicien bitterly, "only proves more conclusively that his acceptance of the Constitution and his declaration of war were play-acting. He wants the Emperor and the King of Prussia to break the Revolution by force, whether it be against the will of the people or not."

"There is no opportunity," said Gabrielle, "to ascertain what is the will of the people. Why should you assume that the Girondins are France, or that Robespierre and his followers are France? I myself think that the people of France, if they were free to do so, would reinstate their King. Can you not admire him for his refusal, this very week, to exile those priests who refuse to take an oath against their conscience and against their religion? You who go to Mass, can you not see that these priests and those who need them, and the King, and even families such as mine, who have abandoned the Catholic religion or practise it but formally, have some claim to speak for France — at least as much claim as the lawyers and demagogues?"

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS !

“Do not think,” said Félicien, “that I have not asked myself these questions, and tortured myself with doubts of this and that. Of course I honour the King for refusing to abandon the priests. But the persecution of the Church, the violence of the streets, the savagery and hatred, are only the poison which men will work out of their blood. After the storm, the hideous injustices, the abominable words spoken in haste — after all the filth and horror of revolution, the permanent thing will emerge — justice for the oppressed. It is our Catholic Faith which says that the brotherhood of man is not a mere phrase, and that privilege has responsibilities. Gabrielle, I cannot tell you in any words what has worked in me since first I called into question all that I had taken for granted. I have had a vision, I think. A mob burned Prémoncourt as an ill-trained child would burn a dog-kennel. And a Picard called Saint-Just said, ‘Happiness is a new idea in Europe.’ I can forget the burning when I think of those words. Or rather, I can remember that the burning had about as much to do with the Revolution as the robberies after dark in the rue de Bercy.”

“Happiness is a new idea in Europe,” repeated Gabrielle, as though to herself. And Félicien turned to look at her. “That is poetry,” she said. “For the first time you have told me something about yourself that I can understand. But, that is poetry. I understand that better than all the raving at the Clubs, or the insanity of Marat, and better than the mystic nonsense of Robespierre, or Vergniaud’s oratory for the sake of oratory. I know you will say I am unfair to them all — except Marat, whom I know you despise. But I can, I can see, I do see, Félicien, what such a sentence as you have quoted would mean to you. Only, it is all idealism. The world is not made like that.”

“The old world was not made like that,” said Félicien. “That is what he meant.”

“Who is this Saint-Just ? I have not heard of him.”

THE GASCON

“ He has a local reputation. But you will hear of him later. He is too young to sit in the Assembly.”

The Marquis de Vaudrelaine wrote to his sister as regularly as possible, and his letters showed a growing disgust with Coblenz. He described it as a hotbed of intrigue and dissipation, and was now determined that it was better for the ladies to remain in Paris, particularly, as he said in one of his letters, in June 1792, “ as Brunswick will move soon, and then the whole business will be over, and I can see my daughters again, and resume my life at Vaudrelaine ”. In another letter he said : “ There are more factions here than there are in Paris, and any firebrand who wanted a text for a discourse or a pamphlet on the useless lives led by the nobility would do well to spend a week in Coblenz. It is difficult for the more serious amongst us, in this atmosphere of folly, to remember that we fight to preserve something more worthy of preservation than the lives of these sots and babblers. Brunswick is gathering his forces, and the Prussians and Austrians will waste no time when once they set out to liberate the King and Queen, and to settle accounts with those who have turned our country upside-down. Nobody has the least doubt of what will happen. The rout of Biron and Dillon showed clearly what we have opposed to us — a mob without discipline. It has become clear at last that it is only a few unprincipled adventurers who are ‘ governing ’ France. The people will rise to welcome us, especially when they see Frenchmen at the head of the invaders, and realize that by submitting to us they will avoid a war against the foreign troops.”

When Gabrielle showed this letter to Félicien, he said : “ Your father is completely misinformed. If that is the prevailing illusion at Coblenz, the invaders may get a surprise.”

In the first days of August Félicien, who felt a responsi-

AUX ARMES, CITOYENS !

bility towards the three ladies in these days of sudden and unexpected dangers, arrived at the house in the rue d'Aguesseau with a wild look in his eyes. The contents of Brunswick's manifesto were known in Paris, and Antoinette said : " That will settle everything without any fighting." " If I believed that were so," said Félicien, " I would no longer wish to call myself a Frenchman."

" Félicien," said Mme. de Mardecques, " I cannot understand you. You are dividing yourself from us, from your kin. We know from Michel that you are one of those who will protect the King and Queen, and, if need be, offer your life for them, if the people rise. Is that still your intention ? "

" It is," said Félicien firmly. " That is purely a French affair. You do not suppose, surely, that I would help Austrians and Prussians to butcher Frenchmen, even if it meant saving the King's life."

Later, when they were alone together, Gabrielle said : " Félicien, your doubts are resolved and you are easier in your mind. Something has happened to you."

" How can you tell that ? " he asked.

" Because I know you so well. You are trying to appear calm, but you are wildly excited. Tell me what has occurred."

Félicien was silent for a moment. Then he spoke slowly, like a man collecting his thoughts.

" I will try to tell you," he said. " I have had a most remarkable experience. You have heard, of course, about the men from Marseilles who came in by the Charenton gate the other day, some hundreds of them, harnessed to their guns. They had marched all the way, and they brought with them a song — the ' Chant de Guerre de l'Armée du Rhin '. The people call it the ' Marseillaise '. I have heard that song, Gabrielle, and I can never be what I was before I heard it. I saw them come up the rue de Charenton. They were burned by the sun, covered with

THE GASCON

dust, and some of them lame. Their faces were the faces of men transfigured, and when they sang that song of theirs, it was as though the very streets of Paris were singing with them, every stick and stone of Paris. Whoever wrote that music was a sorcerer. They say it was composed by an artillery officer. He knew how to find men's hearts. I tell you I was under some influence of magic while they went singing by. You know that I am not moved, save to disgust, by the songs the people sing. The 'Ça ira' is the song of Marat and the gutter. But this song called to what is noblest in men, not to what is basest. It was music for the rough voices of exalted men, it had a gravity, a solemnity. It was not meant to be sung, as these other songs, in a blind bloodthirsty rage. Oh, no. It was a song for the proud, the dedicated. I tell you that music haunts me by night and by day."

"It is so easy," said Gabrielle, "for generous youth to be held by such a spell. You say nothing of the words they sing."

"I have seen a copy of the words. Do not think that this is another song to inflame the mob, to make civil war seem beautiful. The words call on all Frenchmen to resist the enemies of their country, the invaders. It is the answer to Brunswick's insolence. It is a song to inspire men to defend their country, not to tear it to pieces. But why do I try to explain such things to you? How can anyone communicate the effect of music to someone else? You will hear the song, and you will understand what I am trying to say."

"It is hard for a woman to understand what you have told me," said Gabrielle. "Men are moved by such experiences. The tramp of marching feet and the ardour of the battlefield are their world. But we women look behind the rhetoric. I have seen something of this Revolution, Félicien, and while I will admit the faults committed by those who are trying to save all that made France great,

THE NEW SONG

I will never admit the honesty and nobility of the men who have brought my country to this crisis. You are bewitched, Félicien, and are become like a boy who will believe that all in the world is romance. We shall never agree. You will die on the frontiers, I suppose, fighting against my father, and I shall be imprisoned because I was born a Vaudrelaine. But I shall be the happier of us two, needing no song to convince me that what I do is right. Neither you nor I, by what we do, shall bring happiness to the people. But that song of yours is going to take sons and fathers and husbands to their death, and when it is all over France will be destroyed, and the people unhappier than before."

"At any rate," said Félicien, "I do not lose your friendship?"

He smiled ruefully, and Gabrielle met his direct gaze, and her steady eyes were sad, and in her voice were all the world's elegies, as she said: "Always I will be your friend, Félicien."

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEW SONG

BEING by nature inquisitive, and interested in everything that happened in his neighbourhood, Armand Birros always made a point of following a crowd. Oppressed by the heat of a certain July evening in the year 1792, he had thrown himself down on a shabby sofa beneath the open window of the room he occupied on the first floor of a tavern near the Church of St. Paul. But there was no sleep for him. At first he was irritated by the noises of the street, and then by the hum of voices below in the main room of the tavern. Then it occurred to him that all the

THE GASCON

people in the street were going the same way. He got up and leaned out of the window. Below him men and women were hurrying along as though to a meeting.

"What is it now?" shouted Birros. "Has Brunswick come?"

"No," answered a loud voice. "But the Federals of Marseilles have."

Birros had heard how an armed camp was to be established in Paris, and how Barbaroux had called to his native Marseilles to send him a few hundred men who would know how to die. And throughout July there had been rumours that the volunteers from Marseilles and Montpellier were on the road, marching up the Rhone valley through the dust and heat. He ran down the stairs, pushed his way through the throng in the main room, and joined the crowd pressing by all the side streets into the rue St. Antoine. In the distance he could hear cheering, and then the rhythmic beat of a drum. He hauled himself on to a broad window-ledge from which he could see above the heads of the struggling masses, and as he settled himself the cheering came nearer. "One would think," he said to himself, "that these raw recruits had already won a great victory." The next moment he was surprised to see the people withdrawing from the roadway, and a few energetic men pushing the more stubborn of them into the entrances to alleys. The road was kept clear by these men, as though it were indeed an army that was expected and not the straggling lines of unsoldierly youngsters which Birros was prepared to see. As the thud and throb of the drums grew louder, a momentary silence fell on the crowd, although there was still cheering in the distance, and round a bend came the volunteers; five hundred men burnt and blistered by thirty days of hot sun, covered with dust, their shirts open, their boots in shreds. Some wore dirty Phrygian caps, others battered three-cornered hats. Their wet and grimy hair hung in streaks over their faces. But

THE NEW SONG

every one of them, even those that limped, carried himself like a soldier. Hands holding bottles and glasses were stretched out to them, but they kept their ranks as they drank, and answered the greetings of the people with a certain dignity. In the rear came big men harnessed by ropes to the guns which they had dragged across France. And when the crowd saw them straining at the ropes, a sudden burst of cheering broke like a storm, and the people could no longer keep from rushing into the roadway to embrace the weary volunteers. Then from the rear voices roared, "The song! The song! Give us the song!" And from the five hundred throats came that battle-hymn which Mireur had sung for them at the banquet before they set out for Paris.

"Now that," said Birros to himself, "is what I call a song to make a man fight. It wears moustaches."

As they trooped by Birros looked at their faces, stained with sweat and dirt. There were grim faces of fanatics, and gay faces of boys, but the song lit every face, as though one moment of inspiration had transformed the column. They sang the verses slowly, and then when they came to the cry "Aux armes, citoyens!" they shouted them like a command. The song intoxicated the crowd, and hundreds fell in at the rear, among the baggage-wagons, and marched wherever the volunteers would lead them, and as they marched, men, women and children, they added their voices to the uproar, and straightened themselves, imagining that they were already on a field of battle.

Birros jumped down from his window-sill, humming the air to himself, and followed the drum-taps across the Place Beaudoyer, and on towards the Town Hall. By his side walked one of the old fiddlers of Paris, picking out the melody on his violin.

"Old fellow," said Birros, "we are on the winning side, unless the King can produce a better song than that."

"I know no harm of the King," said the old fiddler.

THE GASCON

"I am a musician, and a good song is a good song. People will pay to hear me play it in the evenings."

"Let us step aside," said Birros, "and wash the dust out of our mouths."

They went into a tavern, and sat down to a bottle of wine. But from all over the room came demands for the new song, and as the fiddler hesitatingly played what he could remember, there were plenty to prompt him. And presently a man came in with copies of the words for sale, printed on leaflets, and while the fiddler twanged and scraped and Birros beat time with the bottle, little groups formed to practise the words. Other groups gathered in the doorway, and outside in the street, until all that quarter of Paris was rehearsing earnestly. And while the Marseillais were marching from the Town Hall to their barracks in the Poissonnière district, men with leaflets were doing a roaring trade all over Paris, and other fiddlers were playing in the streets for those who wanted to try their voices. The message which the volunteers had brought to Paris passed thus from street to street, and the darkness of that night was a fiery darkness.

In the rue d'Aguesseau Gabrielle had gone early to her room. Mme. de Mardecques and Antoinette sat at the open window and heard that sullen sound to which they were becoming accustomed, the sound of the streets awakening like a wild beast. Antoinette laid down her book and listened. Mme. de Mardecques went on with her embroidery. Several streets away a clear voice was crying, "A new song! The words of the war-song of the men of Marseilles!" Then there was silence again, save for the distant growling of some vast mob. Presently the sounds of voices bellowing in chorus came from the top of the street. It was a tuneless clamour, interspersed with drunken cackling and ferocious oaths. The noise swept down the street, and it was dominated by one exceptionally

THE NEW SONG

powerful voice which repeated, over and over again, in a monotonous chant, "Le jour de gloire est arrivé". Mme. de Mardecques went on with her work.

"I suppose that is their new song," said Antoinette.

"They are like wild children," said Mme. de Mardecques.

"No, Aunt," said Antoinette, "they are grown-up criminals. They know very well what they are doing."

The drunken crowd stopped further down the street. It was evident that one of the more sober among them was trying to teach them the new song, and when he at last induced them to be silent for a while, he himself sang it in a light tenor. But they would not let him finish, and soon the incoherent bellowing and screaming had started again. Antoinette rose and went to close the windows. A few moments later the voice of the tenor was singing right under the window. When he had finished he shouted, "It will take more than a piece of glass to keep us out, pretty citizeness." His companions began to call him, and the noise slowly passed into another street.

"All the same, there was music in it," said Mme. de Mardecques.

"They probably stole the air from some opera," said Antoinette.

In a scantily furnished room of a gaunt house in the rue Contrescarpe, a number of men sat round a large table. In the place of authority was the citizen Chassaviel, with a leaflet in front of him. He was speaking, and the others were giving all their attention to him.

". . . I care nothing for the tune, whatever it may be. Any tune will serve. And I say that these words are useless. We sent for volunteers to fight, not for poets to sing songs. These words are not for the people. How are men who sing the 'Ça ira' to learn to mouth all this poetry? I am of the people, and I know what I am talking about."

A man with a deceptively mild face sprang to his feet.

THE GASCON

“ Am I not of the people ? ” he shouted. “ I tell you I saw the Federals arrive, and I heard them singing this song. I tell you that all over Paris by now people are learning the words and music. I have never seen St. Antoine so stirred.”

A tall, fair man, whose face was in shadow, began to speak very quietly.

“ I am not of the people,” he said, “ but I have joined them. Citizen Chassaviel is right. This song is no song of an internal war. It is not addressed to those who must march on the Tuileries. Look at the words. It is called the ‘ Song of War of the Army of the Rhine ’. It is a song for soldiers, to rouse them against external enemies ; against the Austrians, against Brunswick, against any foreigner who tries to interfere with us. It is not good poetry. But it is certainly not a catch to be bawled in the streets. It is true that it calls the people to arms, but it also calls them to form their battalions, not their mobs.”

“ Citizen Ducoudray,” said the mild-faced man, “ I repeat that I have seen what is going on, with my own eyes. The people have taken this song and made it their own. I don’t pretend to know what the composer, whoever he may be, intended. I see no difference, myself, between attacking the Austrian woman in the Tuileries and the Austrian armies on our frontiers. Brunswick, Louis, the Emperor, the nobles — it is all one to us. You may split your hairs about soldiers and mobs, but we are all soldiers to-day in the same cause. There is only one war, the war against tyranny, whether the tyrant is on our own frontiers, or in the Tuileries, or among priests and nobles in the western provinces. And I for my part do not see why this song should not help us to unite, instead of making us bicker as we do. Ducoudray would have us fly to the frontier, Chassaviel would lead us against the Tuileries. But both tasks are one and the same task. Whatever we say or do in this room, the people will sing this war-song.”

THE NEW SONG

"It is a shopkeeper's song, a middle-class song," said Chassaviel.

"So much the better," said a plump, red-faced man. "It may win over the timid."

While the discussion was going on, the tramp of feet was heard coming down the street, and the sound of voices singing the song which the Marseillais had brought with them. Silence fell in the room. The man with the mild face went to the window and beat time there with his arm. "Nearly midnight," he said, "and this song is still keeping the people from their beds."

Chassaviel had risen also, and stood at the end of the table, his dark, distrustful face looking from one man to another. Then he went to the window. Voices cried up to him, and, as though almost ashamed, the men in the room began to hum the melody, and then to sing it more loudly. Ducoudray had the words by heart, and sang them in a tuneless baritone. Chassaviel held the leaflet, and the others crowded round him, two of them holding candles to read by. And then they all began to sing, and there were cheers from the street. The little procession passed, but as long as the voices could be heard, the men in the room went on singing.

"Citizens," said Chassaviel, with something as near a smile as that embittered face could produce. "Citizens, it seems that I have been wrong. That song is like a draught of strong wine. It gets into your blood."

When they separated they were still humming the air, like everybody else they met in the streets.

In the rue Neuve-des-Mathurins the old Marquis de Villers-Molain was supping late with his friends. In spite of the heat of the night the tall windows were closely shut, and no attention was paid to the turmoil of the streets. The Comte de Figeac had told, earlier in the evening, how the Federals had arrived in Paris, and how a banquet

THE GASCON

had been given for them, after which there was a brawl. Some gentlemen had drawn their swords, and there had been bloodshed. But this was discussed shortly and in low tones by the men, as they stood in the embrasures of the windows. For there were ladies present, and that meant that there must be a brave pretence that things were almost as they had always been; just as the food, the wine, the service, the costumes, the coiffures and even the conversation were what they had always been. If one or two of the men were, in these days, beginning to lose that self-confidence, that assured manner which so irritated the people, it was not so with the ladies. These were as arrogant as ever, and could still attempt to lead the life they had been accustomed to. There was the house of Julie Talma in the rue Chantierine where they could meet the artists who painted their portraits. There was the salon of the Marquise de Chambonas where the royalist writers gathered. There were the suppers of Mme. de Beauveau and Mme. de Sabran. And for any lady who thought it daring to be an Orleanist there was the house of Mme. de Genlis. They could go to the Salon to see one of David's allegories, or to the Académie des Beaux Arts for Houdon's latest bust. There was the Opera, and there were the theatres.

On this evening the talk of the guests was, for most of the time, as remote from the political events of the day as ever, but everybody, even the most arrogant of the ladies, knew that this was pantomime; that their thoughts were elsewhere, and their minds troubled. Villers-Molain, who knew the world and the hearts of men and women, was not deceived by the laughter of his guests, by their sparkling eyes, by their attention to pointing a phrase or flinging back a witty reply. Yet he knew that this was the way they chose to live, and that this was the way they would die.

Mme. de Champagnolles, in the full beauty of her thirtieth year, sat in a great high-backed chair by the hearth,

THE NEW SONG

and gave one of her impersonations of the dressmaker Ducoffret, overwhelmed with work. Her whole body was eloquent, though she never moved from the chair, and before the laughter had died away she was showing how a woman of the Halles would use a fan. Mme. de Bredeuil, the youngest daughter of Villers-Molain, had discovered a new place to drink ratafia. Mme. de la Sennoyère raved about a young actress at the Ambigu. Mme. de St. Fabry said that if one knew how a certain lady had acquired four magnificent white carriage horses, one would know all there was to know about her. The men played their part in the conversation, but less carelessly. Watching their faces, a spectator would have detected anxiety. They seemed to be listening. They could not forget, as the ladies could, that at any hour of the day or night the dull rumble of the streets might change to the thunder of the marching mobs. Not even the vivacity of Mme. de Champagnolles could completely win them from their preoccupation.

"Hush! Do you not hear? . . ."

The quick, startled interruption came from a woman who had sat silently listening to the talk. Mme. de Lasson was not of the nervous kind, and her exclamation was the more surprising for that. As though there could only be one thought in all minds, the men looked towards the windows, and the heads of the women were turned in the same direction. Mme. de Champagnolles went on using her fan, and its fluttering was the only sound for a moment. Then the talk began again.

"It was nothing."

"Madame de Lasson must tell us what she——"

Mme. de Lasson held up her hand for silence.

"Yes. I too heard——" said the young Comte des Ecreux.

"The ghost of my great-grandfather," said Villers-Molain. "Wherever the ladies are, he is to be found."

"Somebody was playing music," said Mme. de Lasson.

THE GASCON

Several of the men went to the windows and flung them open. But outside was only the silence of the night. Then everybody heard the sound.

"It is inside the house."

"It is in the next room."

"It is upstairs."

They all listened. Somebody was picking out notes with one finger on a harpsichord.

"The little rascal!" said Mme. de Bredeuil. "It is my son, who should be asleep."

"He is going to be a famous musician," said Mme. de Champagnolles. "They all go on like this, from the age of two."

"Let us go and see what he is composing," said one of the gentlemen.

The door was opened, and from above came sounds monotonously repeated, ten notes, over and over again.

Villers-Molain and his guests trooped up the stairs as quietly as they could. The door of a small room next to the boy's bedroom was open, and the little fellow of eight years old was seated at the instrument, with his back to the door. When he heard them he swung round, but did not seem at all abashed.

"My dear one," said his mother, "you should be in bed and asleep. What are you doing?"

"It's a song," said the boy.

"Play it to us then once, before we go," said his proud mother.

The boy once more picked out his ten notes.

"It has words," he said.

"Of course," said his mother.

"Allons enfants de la patrie-ie-e," sang the boy in a quavering voice.

"And did you make this up, Pierre?" asked his mother.

"Oh, no."

"Well, what is it?"

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

"When I was coming home this evening with my nurse, they were singing it."

"Who were singing it?"

"All the people in the street. But I can't remember any more of it."

"It is a silly song," said his grandfather. "It'll be forgotten in a day or two, and then there'll be a new one."

The little boy was taken back to bed, and the guests came downstairs again.

"That was the song of these Federals from Marseilles that he was playing," said de Figeac.

"No politics, I implore you," said Mme. de Champaignolles.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

It was a Thursday evening, August 9th, in the year 1792. As the darkness descended upon Paris there were many who hoped for a cool draught of air after the stifling heat of the day. But there was no relief. The heat stored in the stone walls and cobbles rose as the twilight deepened, and it was as though the doors of a furnace had been opened. In the narrow streets of the St. Antoine district men and women lounged in doorways or leaned, half undressed, from windows. Armand Birros sat outside a café in the rue St. Bernard, with his coat unbuttoned and his hat on the ground at his feet. Across the street somebody was picking out on a flute the new song which the men of Marseilles had brought northwards with them. Further away a drum was being beaten in an inexpert manner, and a voice was calling words which he could not hear. He knew the talk of the quarter — the Austrian woman's

THE GASCON

treachery, and Brunswick's intolerable reply. Paris was to be burned, they said, and the inhabitants butchered, and the King and Queen would join the advancing Prussians and Austrians unless the people finished what had been begun three years before. Foreign regiments were already surrounding the Tuileries, to protect the Palace. Those who knew what they were talking about had seen the long columns, thousands upon thousands of Swiss and Germans, coming in by the rue du Roule and the Cours la Reine ; infantry, cavalry and guns. It was to be a fight, and the people must strike first. Saint-Marcel was ready to march, and the Marseillais were at boiling-point. They were weary of playing at revolution. The thing must be settled one way or the other.

Intent on seeing all that was to be seen, Birros rose and began to walk slowly westwards. On every side there was menace, something more oppressive than the thundery weather. It was as if the whole of Paris was whispering, and would presently murmur, and after murmuring, roar. It was dark now, and he picked his way carefully by the occasional lamps in brackets or slung across the narrow streets on ropes. Everywhere windows were set wide, and the light streaming out seemed to increase the heat. People shouted to him as he passed. A woman said, " You there, you will arrive before the doors are open," and a man, staggering out of a drink-shop, cried to him : " Their bowels must be hung on the railings outside the Palace. See that this is done and I will make you Minister of Justice," and he laughed until he was suddenly sick. Further on Birros met a little knot of men marching in a most determined manner to some rendezvous. They went along very rapidly, and without uttering a word, and there was a firm purpose in their strained faces. In the rue de la Cérisaie he stopped outside a dismal building, brilliantly lighted. From an open window light fell across the street, and a young man was speaking in a high clear voice :

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

“ . . . To finish June the twentieth. If we show one moment's fear or make one movement of hesitation, all is lost. They will say we are afraid of them. Afraid of them ! Why, their sting is drawn, and they can no longer harm us if we act like heroes. . . . The sword of Brutus from its sheath . . . the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of a tyrant. The hour of words is past, the hour of deeds is come. Let us go forward to bring justice back to the world, so that our children may speak our names with pride. O Liberty, powerful goddess, I think I see thine arm upraised for a signal. Thou callest us, and we follow. Strike, strike, O noble hearts. . . .” Applause and an outcry of enthusiasm drowned the end of his sentence, and Birros, turning from the window, almost tripped over the recumbent body of a snoring drunkard. As he went on he met more bands of men, some armed with muskets, some with clubs or knives. In one group there was a man with a brand-new axe over his shoulder. He seized Birros by the arm, shouting, “ Another recruit, boys ! ” But all he got for his pains was a blow in the stomach. The man's companions took no notice, but hurried on. Down one of the streets that led to the river, there was a knot of men outside the door of a building. Muskets were being distributed to them, and by the looks they gave the weapons, most of them had never seen a musket before. They held them as though they expected them to go off at any minute, and Birros wondered to what task these warriors would apply themselves in the coming action.

A man in a tricolour sash dashed by on a lean, foam-flecked horse. At the sound of the hoofs a very fat woman hung out of a window and bawled : “ The cavalry is retreating. They couldn't stand the stink of the tyrant's lair.” And a man inside the room dragged her back and smacked her face. Nobody seemed to be in bed, although it was now getting on for midnight. There was still no breath of air in the streets. On the Quai des Célestins

THE GASCON

there was a crowd collected round men with swords and pikes and torches. In the flare of the torches Birros could see excited faces, and it was clear that the rabble had been persuaded to attach themselves to the armed men. Many of them were tattered and half-starved, with those husky voices which go with lives lived in gutters and brothels. They were creatures of the night who crept about in the darkness, stealing food and drink, and were never seen during the hours of daylight. Some of them were demanding more than the paltry coin they had been given for their services, but he who seemed to be in command of the strange troop said sternly: "It's payment in advance, isn't it? If I gave you more, you'd desert." One big man in a tiny coat was determined to make trouble. He swaggered up to the commander and flung his coin at his feet with an oath. The other rascallions showed their approval. Whereupon a pikeman pulled a pistol from his waist and shot the big man in the knee. He went down with a scream, and the commander laughed heartily.

Though he was walking slowly, Birros was by this time in a fine sweat, and had a good thirst. He went into a tavern for a bottle of wine and for the first time that night lost the sense of an imminent explosion of popular violence. A lugubrious man in a dirty red apron served him, and then continued a dull conversation about horses with another customer, a goggle-eyed youth with a very stupid face. The lugubrious proprietor said: "In saddling your raw colt, the first thing to do is to keep him quiet, and the dangerous moment is when he feels the girths tightening under his belly. You must get on to his back very quietly, and only ride him for a moment or two at first. No spurs. Very light hands. And watch him closely all the time." The youngster nodded solemnly and the lecture went on. At another table two men were playing cards. But far off in the streets there was a burst of song, and presently the tramp of many feet, going westwards. Birros sat on,

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

deep in thought. He could not settle in his own mind whether whatever was afoot to-night was elaborately planned, or a spontaneous rising. So far there was no sign of cohesion, and nobody seemed to be obeying orders. He had always understood that the mobs of the revolutionary episodes were paid, but from his own observation he would say that this only applied to the riff-raff. And to-night there was more than the riff-raff at work. He considered once again, and for the hundredth time, the two sides in the quarrel. Evidently the King and Queen were in conspiracy with foreign powers, and were ready to sell their people for their own safety. And evidently whatever superseded them in the government of France would be abominable. At the elbows of the lawyers and theorists would be, at best, adventurers, and at worst the scum of the city. He came to his old conclusion. It was a choice of evils. He was inclined to think that the Monarchy would win, if what he had seen to-night was a sample of the army which was going into battle against it. But then he remembered the men of Marseilles and their song, and the flame of fanaticism in the eyes of certain young men who loathed their gutter-following but appreciated its uses. He remembered also the hideous giant whom he had heard speaking on several occasions — Danton. This name was of great weight with the people. Had he, and the eloquent little cat-faced pedant Robespierre, and the impudent journalist Desmoulins, really a scheme for the regeneration of society — or did they merely want to see the mob take revenge for its poverty and misery, as did the lunatic Marat ?

He was roused from these thoughts by a drum beating in the distance, somewhere across the river, and it occurred to him that it might be interesting to see what was going on in the neighbourhood of the Tuileries. He paid his reckoning and went on his way. As though he imagined that the heat might be less stifling by the river, he went

THE GASCON

along the quays. The Seine was dark and still, and the night very silent, and it seemed that he had come into a kind of no-man's-land between the Palace and the insurgents of Saint-Antoine. He went along the Quai des Ormes and past the wharves where corn was unloaded. In the stern of a battered old boat a man was scraping a fiddle for his own amusement. On the Quai Pelletier troops were lounging, and at the entrance to the rue de la Mortellerie there were mounted police, standing by their horses. He was evidently out of the no-man's-land now. On the Pont-au-Change there were more troops, and a gun was being hauled across, with much clattering, to the left bank. Birros had enough of the soldier in him to realize that the men of Saint-Marcel would have to cross this bridge or the Pont-Neuf or the Notre-Dame bridge to make a junction with their comrades of Saint-Antoine, if a serious attack upon the Palace were intended. It looked as though the Monarchy was ready for the clash.

It was now about a quarter to one in the morning. The heat had not abated. Six men, with officialdom written all over them, went by, walking very fast, and with something furtive in their haste. A soldier shouted, "This way for the Hôtel-de-Ville." The hurrying men did not reply. And then, from the direction of the Pont-Neuf came a single cannon-shot. Birros, tense with excitement, stood as still as a stone. He strained every nerve to listen, being certain that this was the signal awaited by one side or the other. Another moment, and he would hear drums and wild cries, and the faubourgs would be on the march. Or, what was more likely, the Tuileries had decided to attack first. The streets would be swept by cavalry, the bridges blocked, the crowds dispersed. He was sure it would all be over very quickly, but he would have liked to know what the Marseillais were up to.

The silence which succeeded the cannon-shot seemed more menacing than any outcry or rhythm of marching

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

feet. It was easy to imagine the mob creeping closer to the Palace by narrow streets. He remained where he had stopped, still straining his ears. But all he heard was a girl's laugh in an upper room, and the whinnying of a horse close at hand. And then the tocsin sounded. St. Germain l'Auxerrois on the right bank answered St. Gervais on the left bank and then, from every quarter of Paris, more and more bells joined in the clamour. There were little groups of men running now, some armed, some unarmed, and all going towards the Place de Grève. Neither soldiers nor police attempted to interfere with them, and Birros suspected that the Commune had been summoned for a crisis. He did not know till afterwards that a new Commune was seizing power on this night.

"This is no time for sleep," said Birros to himself, and he went forward in the direction of the Tuileries, while the bells of Paris clanged like an iron voice above the summer night. Now and again he looked back, or stopped to listen, but there were still none of the sounds of insurrection which he expected at every minute. And when he came in sight of the Place du Carrousel it was deserted.

In one of the brightly-lighted galleries of the Tuileries, facing the main court, a group of the King's gentlemen stood in conversation. The windows were open on account of the heat, and they could see below the troops and the guns which were to protect the inner court and the main entrance of the Palace. The soldiers had piled their muskets and were sleeping or playing cards. One of the gentlemen, all of whom were fully armed, had leaned far out of a window and had now drawn back again to join the little circle.

"I find it all too unreal to be true," he said. "Presently we shall awake, all of us."

"There is nothing unreal about it," answered a tall, handsome old man at his side. "The attack is for to-night."

THE GASCON

It is common talk in the streets and taverns. The National Guard know all about it. Half of them are unreliable. They will probably join the mob."

Young Michel de Vaudrelaine, who had shed his fopperies in the grave hours through which he had lived, shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "I am of the opinion, Monsieur de Villers-Molain," he said, "that our best defence is attack. I think we should strike first, carry the war to the lairs of these wild beasts, and smoke them out. Or do you tell me that a pack of drunken brawlers can stand against regular troops?"

The old Marquis smiled tolerantly at the young man. "Such sentiments do your heart credit, my dear de Vaudrelaine; but not your head. The small number of trained troops we could spare for such a sortie — I beg of you to remember that we are a besieged garrison, with traitors in our midst — could not hope to fight unseen hordes barricaded in their houses, with most of the population aiding them. If they come out into the streets it is another question. But to seek them out in their alleys would be mere folly, had we ten times the force now at our disposal. Furthermore, we do not wish to shed blood unless we are compelled to."

At that moment a man rode into the courtyard and dismounted.

"Here comes de Prémoncourt with the latest news," said a voice.

A few minutes later they crowded round the newcomer. Men left their groups to hear what was toward.

Félicien shrugged his shoulders to their eager questioning. "The Sections are meeting," he said, "and there is a lot of coming and going, but no sign of a gathering of the mob. I rode slowly up and down most of the streets between here and the Pont-Neuf, between the quays and Saint-Honoré. Mandat has his men on the bridges, and I believe there are some thousands of us here, counting

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

the Swiss. We ought to be able to deal with any attempted surprise."

"It's guns that will settle it," said Villers-Molain.

"We have guns," said a sour-faced young man.

"So have the Marseillais," said Félicien. "But not many, I believe. There is no doubt something is afoot. There's a kind of expectancy in the streets. I passed excited groups, who cursed me, and there are drums beating in the distance, out towards St. Antoine."

Another man joined them, an exquisitely dressed, fat man of middle age. "Chadraches has just ridden in," he said. "He's been over the river. He says that St. Marcel is mustering, and he heard from a fellow at the Corazza that the Town Hall has been seized. . . ."

"By the mob?" asked an incredulous voice.

"Oh, no. The Sections elected their men, and just turned out the present lot. It seems that Paris has a new governing body; and what will the Assembly say to that, I wonder?"

"Perhaps that is the night's work," said Villers-Molain.

"I very much doubt it," answered Prémoncourt. "That would be only half a victory. The men at the Town Hall were mostly on our side. That's why they've been turned out—if the story is true. When the Sections know that their move has been successful, they will turn the mobs upon us, never fear."

"The brother of Madame de l'Huisne," said a burly Captain of the King's Bodyguard, "has been in the faubourgs. He disguised himself. His report is that there is open talk of an attack on the Palace to-night. The people are counting on winning over the Swiss and the National Guard and the other troops. They think that, with that accomplished, they could make short work of the rest of us. But here comes Tallandier. He may have further news."

A very dark man, with a scar across his right cheek, and the self-confident bearing of one accustomed to command,

THE GASCON

halted unsmilingly at the edge of the group. "A few more rumours," he said sternly, "and we shall be like a pack of hysterical women."

"What is your honest opinion?" asked Prémoncourt.

"Monsieur," said Tallandier, "I know nothing. It is our duty to be prepared."

"I will tell you something," said a clear melodious voice, "and it is not a rumour."

There was general laughter, for it was said that Briotte had no interest in life but gossip, and Mme. de Ricametz.

"To-night, this very night," said Briotte, "the little scribbling fellow Dumoulin, or whatever he calls himself, gave a dinner-party at his house, and the Marseillais were there, and the mad bull Danton. Add that up, my fine fellows."

"We shall survive even a journalist's dinner-party," said Michel de Vaudrelaine.

Félicien moved away from the group, to another window, and stood leaning against a high-backed chair. He heard a young man's voice saying: "Only one thing is needed. Let the King show himself amongst us and speak a few words to us. He will not have to ask us a second time to do his bidding." And a woman's voice replied: "The King is dumb with fatigue. They will not let him alone, with their advice to do this and to do that. The Queen would have him stand firm; Roederer would have him leave the Palace. Mandat is afraid to act without Pétion's approval. They say the National Guard has no ammunition."

Presently there was a stir at the doors, and a big, florid man came quickly through the throng, followed by officials in tricolour scarves. It was Pétion, Mayor of Paris. A gentleman was taking him to the Salle du Conseil, where the King and Queen were deliberating. This started a fresh crop of rumours, and everybody was talking at once. Félicien, heavy-hearted, sat down on the arm of the chair,

THE MOB STORMS THE TUILERIES

and gazed out at the night. He had no doubt of the coming attack, and he agreed with the young man who had longed for a word from the King. Félicien knew that, whatever bitterness and disillusion the conduct of the King and Queen had bred in him, he would have faced death with enthusiasm for the right word or the right look at this eleventh hour. For he told himself that, however just was the cause of the people, his lineage made it impossible for him to be anywhere to-night but here. And he tried to think of the French Monarchy, and not of the kindly and bewildered Louis or the stubborn and uncomprehending Marie-Antoinette. He was so standing, deep in thought, when a single cannon-shot shook the windows and the chandeliers. For a second or two there was silence, and then the high, hysterical laugh of a woman. A door opened. Somebody shouted an order. And then there was a babble of voices. Below in the main court there was shouting and a clatter of muskets, and the sound of feet running and stumbling. The King's gentlemen took up their positions by the windows, in the ante-rooms and at the head of the main staircase. Félicien, whose task had been allotted to him, joined Tallandier and Villers-Molain outside the closed doors of one of the ante-rooms. The women had withdrawn, and the babble of talk had died down, as each man strained his ears, expecting another shot and the approach of the mob. And then the bells began to ring. A messenger returned and announced that the Carrousel was deserted, and the approaches to it, and that there was no movement on the bridges. As the time passed, and nothing occurred, the gentlemen relaxed their vigilance, leaving one in each group to stand sentry. Some talked and played cards, and others slept fitfully. The Palace was silent, and silent the city outside, save for the bells. The hours of the night went by, the summer dawn broke and the sun arose, and the watchers told themselves that the peril was past. The youngsters repeated that they had always known that a

THE GASCON

mere show of force would be sufficient to intimidate the mobs. But older men had heard the fate of Mandat, the commander entrusted with the defence of the Palace. It could not be hidden any longer that he had been summoned to the Commune during the night, and there murdered. One or two even knew the fiasco of the King's pitiful inspection of the disaffected National Guard, and the Queen's anger, and knew that the faubourgs were on the march.

Félicien's turn came to sleep at about six-thirty. He rolled himself in his cloak and sat down with his back to a wall. He was asleep immediately, and he slept heavily until somebody shook him and a voice said in his ear, "To your post. They are coming."

Félicien took his position outside the closed door. In front of him, all down the gallery, he saw the gentlemen form into groups of fifteen, in three ranks of five, and take their stations, the rear rank against the wall. A squad of the National Guard, with muskets loaded, lined the windows, and knelt, ready to fire. The gentlemen drew their swords. An officer, passing from group to group, told them that the mounted gendarmerie were in position in the Carrousel, and the Swiss on the central staircase, and outside the royal apartments. Somebody said, "They're coming along the Quai de l'École."

The roaring of a distant crowd was growing louder. Félicien from his post could not see what was going on outside, but he knew from the exclamations of the soldiers, the din of voices, and the ragged volleys in the distance, that the attack had begun. Then he saw the soldiers at the windows raise their muskets and await the order to fire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BIRROS CHANGES SIDES, AND SEES THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

BIRROS, tired of walking about, had found an old tub of a boat moored under the Quai de l'École and had climbed into it and fallen asleep. It was daylight when the tramp of feet and the sound of loud voices awoke him. He clambered out of the boat and saw that the quays and the streets running northwards and westwards were packed with leaderless mobs. They were all surging and swaying towards the arcades of the Louvre and the great open Carrousel, and Birros found himself swept along. On his left was a man who stank like an open sewer and poured out a ceaseless torrent of blasphemy. On his right was a horrible, muscular hag who had once been a woman. She bellowed phrases of filth as she strode along. With a broad smile, Birros said to himself: "There are moments when it becomes childishly simple to take sides in this extraordinary quarrel. Upon my life, I prefer the scented fops of the world to my present companions. Being a man of sensibility, I find myself, for the moment, an aristocrat, a royalist, a pet of the Monarchy. And since this appears to be the best way of joining the defenders of the Palace, I will stay with these disgusting friends of mine until I can give them the slip." So saying, he squared his shoulders and let himself be pushed and dragged slowly along. He never knew what was happening in the van. It seemed to him that a vast, dirty human wave was pouring itself along the streets. All will go well with them, he said, until somebody fires. Presently the crowd seemed to hesitate. There was shouting up ahead, and a mass detached itself and came out into the rue St. Nicaise, and spread across the Carrousel. Birros found himself separated

THE GASCON

from his companions, and what had been a compact crowd was now a number of straggling groups, hastily trying to link up in this too wide space. He could see the wooden barrier of the outer courts, and mounted men formed up, and behind them the long, low façade of the Palace, the tall windows, the chimney-stacks, the central pavilion. From moment to moment he expected the Carrousel to be raked with grape-shot and musket balls, especially as the mob, hastily re-forming into a mass, began to deliberate loudly under the very guns of the garrison. Birros wondered why the mounted men did not open the gates of the forecourts and sweep the Carrousel clear.

But it was the mob that acted first. There was a swelling roar and Birros was rushed forward with the rest. The barrier was smashed, the mounted men were dragged from their horses and clubbed, or shot, or stabbed. But into their rising enthusiasm, as they approached the entrance to the main court, was suddenly poured an accurate fire. The grape tore holes in their ranks, and the yells of triumph changed to shrieks and groans. While the unwounded wavered, the red-coated Swiss came charging out by the main gate, and all who could, turned and ran.

Birros had leaped the fallen and smashed barrier and, while the first wave of the attackers paused to take stock of the situation, he ran towards the nearest gun, crying at the top of his voice, "Vive le Roi!" No doubt somebody would have fired at him, suspecting a trap, but there was a sergeant standing by the gun who had the intelligence to see that Birros evidently did not fit in with the tattered rabble about him. The sergeant suspected that he had been taken prisoner and was now escaping. But before they could exchange a word Birros was caught up in the confusion of the Swiss charge and, when they came back, having cleared the Carrousel and the forecourts, Birros came with them. It was taken for granted that he was of the Palace garrison. He found himself wedged in among

BIRROS SEES THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

a troop of men who entered the Palace by a high glass door. After breaking free, he wandered about for some time among the Swiss who thronged the stairs and the rooms on the ground floor. Nearly everybody was saying that the repulse of the mob was complete, and that it had had a lesson which wouldn't need to be repeated. But one or two said : " But what of the Marseillais ? This was a mere vanguard. There will be a second attack, and a more vigorous one." Presently Birros found himself close to the western entrance which led into the Tuileries gardens. He went out, but was almost immediately pulled to the side of the main pathway across the gardens by a National Guard. He heard murmurs and authoritative voices demanding passage for the King and Queen. Forty years later Birros told his grandchildren how he had, by chance, seen the end of the Monarchy.

He saw a Major of the Swiss come through the entrance to the gardens and pause, looking this way and that. And then a solitary figure came into sight, stepping heavily and uncertainly, with a kind of waddling walk. He was a corpulent man of middle age, with thick shoulders. He, too, paused a moment, and spoke a word to the Major, who preceded him along the path. Birros recognized Louis XVI, and was astonished at the lack of majesty. His clothes were disarranged and flaked with powder from his untidy hair, his face was very pale and bloated, and his eyes were dull, like those of a man half fainting for lack of sleep. His clumsy movements also suggested the extreme of weariness, as he glanced round to see that he was followed by his family. Behind him came the Queen, and Birros understood that men would think it a light thing to die for her. She, too, was weary, but had not forgotten the care of her person. Nor had she forgotten that, even on this humiliating journey, she was a queen. Her head, the poise of it, and the carriage of her body were regal. And although her face was stamped with disdainful pride, there was an inexpressible grace in her progress. She seemed

THE GASCON

hardly to touch the ground as she walked, and the small hand which held her son's was exquisitely beautiful. The little son half ran, half walked by her side, kicking at the dead leaves, and uttering childish exclamations. While he was watching her, Birros heard shouting on the terrace of the Feuillants, and, turning, he saw that an angry crowd had collected there. The Princess Royal and Mme. Elizabeth went by — the Princess, who was old enough to be frightened, wept quietly. Then came the Ladies of the Household, officers, ministers, officials. The howling of the crowd grew louder.

Birros was puzzled. He had seen the mob repulsed. The garrison had won a victory. Yet the King and Queen had left the Palace, and that slow procession suggested to him a capitulation. But why capitulate after a victory? He had not long to wait for a reply. Firing broke out on the eastern side of the Tuileries, and he heard men saying that the real attack had started. St. Antoine and St. Marcel had arrived, and the men of Marseilles, with guns. This was to be a very different encounter. Birros pushed his way into the Palace again, and took up his stand at the foot of a staircase. He could hear the volleys of musketry from the upper windows. But presently, above all the other noises, he heard the song of the Marseillais. "If we had a song like that," he said to himself, "we should fight better." "If we had a King to lead us," he added, "we should not need a song."

Birros found that he had taken up his position among a number of gentlemen who evidently had their orders. They made no attempt to leave the foot of the staircase, even when the attackers seemed to be gaining ground. Once they opened their ranks to let through a detachment of the National Guard, who went leaping up the steps two at a time. Somebody said, "They have broken in from the quays." It was obvious, also, that the defenders were being driven slowly back from the Carrousel and the fore-

BIRROS SEES THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

courts. Wounded men were being dragged or carried back into the Palace in increasing numbers. To Birros, standing still there with the battle going on all round him, it seemed nonsense not to counter-attack. But he realized that these gentlemen who had accepted his sword, had well-defined ideas about their duty at this moment. There was a cool courage in them which Birros, a hot-blooded fighter, was well able to admire. They showed no enthusiasm, no gaiety. They were clearly a sacrifice, and Birros could get no pleasure out of being a sacrifice for a cause which did not inspire him. As he looked at them, he saw that they were of all ages. But young and old were equally calm, standing there shoulder to shoulder. Glancing round, he saw that he was in a vast hall, and that the Swiss were forming up in two ranks, stretching from the foot of the staircase to a door at the far end of the hall. The front rank knelt, the rear rank stood.

The gentlemen exchanged no conversation, and as they did not flinch when stray shots struck the balustrade, or the walls of the hall, Birros also did not flinch. "A fine folly," he said to himself, "standing here like statues. We shall all be killed before we start fighting, and poor little Birros must pretend that he welcomes this sort of death. Oh, what demon of Hell induced me to get myself into such a fix?"

"Entrails of my entrails, gentlemen!" cried the unhappy Birros. "When do we fight?"

"Patience, provincial," said a voice near him. "You will have all the fighting you want soon enough."

The firing was now incessant and the sound of splintering glass mingled with it. Birros heard once or twice a word of command at the top of the stairs, and another body of troops, drawn from some other part of the Palace, went hastily up the stairs. Once a group of women, most of them in tears, passed across the hall and went out into the gardens. And then, above the cries of the mob and the

THE GASCON

firing, there rose like a towering wave about to submerge the garrison, that song which had come northwards with the Marseillais. It was closer now, and Birros could hear the words. The melody was taken up by many who had no idea of the words, and it seemed to drive the attackers forward irresistibly. There was a crash as a door was broken in, and a smashing and splintering of wood. In a gap away to the right Birros caught a glimpse of a huge man hacking with a hatchet. The next moment the giant had fallen forwards, his body half in the hall and half out, with a bullet through his throat.

Birros saw the gentlemen on either side of him take the pistols from their belts and grip their drawn swords, when the vanguard of the mob burst into the hall. The Swiss began to fire, but that first onrush was well supported. "Now, indeed, we fight," cried Birros, stepping forward to give his sword arm free play. A young man with blood-shot eyes and a pale face dripping with perspiration ran at Birros. He carried no weapon, and Birros threw him back into the arms of those who followed him. And then, by sheer weight of bodies, the gentlemen were forced back. The Swiss had no room to reload or to aim, and the swordsmen no play for their weapons. To Birros it was like a struggle in a nightmare, for he seemed to be wedged and pinioned for minutes together. So close was the press that those higher up on the stairs could not fire their pistols for fear of hitting their own people. Birros found himself face to face with a long, lean, gaunt fellow in a blue shirt. With a short jab he brought the pommel of his sword up against the man's chin. The body sagged, but the man did not fall. He could not fall. He was too tightly clinched on either side. And all the time the invaders of the Palace were straining and pressing, so that the defenders had to give ground. Birros was soon on the stairs and hammering the heads below him with his pistol-butt. Step by step the retreat went on. Birros saw some

BIRROS SEES THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

queer sights on that day. There was a drunken man with a scythe, which he wielded with impartiality, wounding friends and enemies. He was the only fighter there who had space to manœuvre, for both friend and foe kept clear of that absurd but deadly weapon. He was finally shot at point-blank range by one of his companions, whose cheek he had gashed with his scythe. Then there was a burly brown-bearded man who fought a strange duel with a swordsman, using the spoke of a wheel as his sword. He broke off his adversary's weapon short at the hilt, but in his moment of triumph he was run through by somebody else. "Never did I enjoy a fight less," said Birros to himself. "But, indeed, this is not fighting as I understand it. It would make me laugh if I were not so damnably jostled and stifled here. There is no standing firm against a moving wall of mud."

Birros had imagined that when, in their upward and backward movement, they had reached the landing there would be more room. But matters were just the same here. He heard a voice in his ear and turned and met the melancholy eyes of Félicien de Prémoncourt. "Whose side are you on now, my friend?" asked Félicien, with a faint smile. "I'll be hanged if I know," replied Birros.

"The King has sent a second order to the Swiss to cease fire and save themselves," said Félicien. "Hervilly has given the command. There was nothing else to do."

On the terrace of the Feuillants the angry crowd swept forward, threatening the Royal Family, but unable to come near enough to do them bodily harm. Among those gentlemen who made a buckler of their bodies, and retreated step by step, facing the crowd, was the old Marquis de Villers-Molain. With a stern face and unflinching eyes, he withdrew very slowly, and about him, and shoulder to shoulder, were other noblemen, each with his sword drawn, and each on the watch for any sudden rush of the crowd. The snarling mass of men and women were infuriated by the

THE GASCON

fearlessness of this handful of aristocrats. Their clothes, their bravery, their evident contempt for the mob lashed the ringleaders to a frenzy. Obscene taunts were shouted, and one or two of the foremost, who were separated by only a few yards from their prey, hoped to provoke one of the gentlemen to a sudden blow, knowing that this would loose the mob in uncontrollable savagery. But this rearguard knew what it guarded, and under every provocation, each remained silent, and controlled his anger. They could have been overthrown and trampled and crushed by sheer weight of numbers, and there were moments when the crowd seemed about to surge forward — but always something kept them at bay. Had the gentlemen shown a second's fear or even anxious uncertainty, they would have been torn to pieces. But their soldierly qualities and their disciplined withdrawal dominated even the most rash of their assailants.

The old Marquis, though his handsome face betrayed nothing but cool determination, was calculating how long the mob must be held before the Royal Family would be in safety. He and his companions gave ground as slowly as possible, but every one of them knew that at any moment some unexpected incident might precipitate the crisis. Villers-Molain had picked out the half-dozen most dangerous men from whom an attack might come. They were all in the forefront, while in the rear the women urged on the rank and file with a stream of vile talk. One very loud voice cried repeatedly : " They shall not enter the Assembly ! No. They shall not enter the Assembly ! " Villers-Molain knew how small was the group about the King and Queen, for it had been urged that a powerful escort would merely aggravate the rage of the mob. Deputies and municipal officers were mingling with the people in an endeavour to restrain them, and Roederer addressed them, telling them that they would gain nothing by molesting the Royal Family. But among the crowd moved also Théroigne de

BIRROS SEES THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY

Méricourt, the Penthesilea of the march on Versailles.

There came a pause, a halt. Villers-Molain dared not turn round to see what had happened. At first he thought that the King had been attacked, for there was a sudden burst of shouting behind him, and above it that mad voice, "They shall not enter the Assembly." He showed nothing of his fear and horror in his eyes, and remained erect and still, his sword ready, his strong face hard and proud, his eyes meeting the glaring eyes of a drunken wretch who had pushed to the front and was mocking him. The noise behind him increased, and then suddenly died down. Word came from the entrance of the Manège, and was passed on. Villers-Molain heard a voice whisper over his shoulder: "They are safe inside. Vergniaud has assured them of protection." Even then, though he could have laughed for joy, Villers-Molain allowed no emotion to pass across his face, lest the nearest of the crowd should see it and guess what had happened. But the news was soon known to the mob. Some accepted it sulkily, others, as though they were not sure who would win the day, slipped away. But there were those whose anger passed all bounds. The quarry had escaped them, but before them they still had the rock-steady, disdainful noblemen. The gentlemen behind Villers-Molain relaxed their vigilance somewhat. They saw no danger of an attack on the Manège, which was now protected by the National Guards in force. But Villers-Molain did not consider his duty fully done, and, with half a dozen more, he continued to go back step by step in the same attitude of defiance. A man then pressed forward towards him, aflame with hatred; a thickset man of middle age, carrying a heavy club. He came within reach of the Marquis, and began, coldly and deliberately, to say certain unprintable things of the Queen.

The old gentleman, filled with loathing for what he saw on every side of him, heartbroken for the humiliation put upon the Royal Family this day, infuriated by his own

THE GASCON

inability to do anything but retreat, had yet kept a firm hand on himself. He knew that the mob wanted him to lose his temper, and the knowledge helped him to show no sign of his feelings. But now that the crisis had passed, and he was aware that his companions regarded their task as accomplished, all the rage which he had suppressed broke forth. His grim face changed, and the man with the club saw the change and continued to goad him, until Villers-Molain, with an oath, ceased to withdraw. In a moment he was surrounded. They pressed in on him, cutting him off from his companions, and he had no room to use his sword. They bore him down, and he struggled to free his sword arm, until a blow on the head stunned him. They kicked him where he lay, and when they had killed him, stripped off his clothes and fought for them, and left his bruised and battered body to be trampled and torn by their comrades.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHAT OCCURRED AT THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

AFTER the fall of the Monarchy Michel de Vaudrelaine, like most of those who had fought for the King during the storming of the Tuileries, went into hiding. His family had no news of him, since any message from him would have compromised them even more than they were already compromised. They heard, in an indirect manner, that he was living in a garret, and waiting to escape across the frontier. Of Félicien they had no word but guessed that he was already with the armies. The house in the rue d'Aguesseau, although the ladies seldom ventured abroad,

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

could not keep out the rumours of the day, and the frenzies of the capital penetrated its thick walls and filled the family with increasing anxiety. Thionville and Longwy had fallen, and the Prussians were advancing, and the mood of the extremists was close to madness. Journalists like Fréron were raving daily against all who were even remotely connected with the suspects, and were demanding wholesale massacre. The regiments were passing through Paris hour by hour, and tales of royalist conspiracies and discoveries of treacherous documents in the cupboards and chests of the Tuileries held up all who had supported the Monarchy as enemies of the troops who were marching out to fight the foreign invader. They were all represented by the street orators as the allies of the invaders, as men who would try to seize power, and would murder the wives and families of the patriots. No rumour was too fantastic for Marat and Hébert, and there were even moderates, such men as the Girondins Gorsas and Louvet, who clearly prophesied the coming massacres. Danton himself urged the immediate trial of all suspects, in order to forestall the savagery of the mob. Meanwhile the Prussians advanced.

Many earnest conversations were held in the house of Mme. de Mardecques, but they led nowhere. At one time she suggested that they should try to escape, but the project appeared hopeless as soon as it was considered. Antoinette, who had grown graver during these weeks of perpetual anxiety, held to her opinion that it would be necessary for them to go to prison for a while, but that the advancing armies would soon enter Paris and liberate them. The King would be restored and life would become normal again. Gabrielle was more doubtful. She agreed that they must remain to face whatever was in store for them, but she spoke of the possibility that the Revolution might prove too strong for the invaders, and in her own mind she admitted the peril of death which would never leave them if they were once arrested.

THE GASCON

None of them was surprised when, on an evening towards the end of August, the sound of musket-butts was heard in the street below. They glanced at each other, and then the three of them stood up, with their eyes on the door. The official who came in, followed by four soldiers, told them bluntly that they were the sister and daughters of an *émigré*; that one of their family had been in the Tuileries on August 10th; that they had consorted with aristocrats and enemies of the Revolution, and by word and behaviour had proved themselves enemies of the Revolution. They spoke no word and stood without movement. They were bidden collect the things they would need, as they would be taken to the Petite Force at once. The official shed something of his brutal manner when he had read from the document in his hand. The beauty of the two girls and that pride which he detested but admired, even led him to attempt some clumsy gesture of courtesy. It was received in silence, and within an hour the three were on their way to the prison.

A concierge registered them at La Force, while his wife kept up a commentary of insult and sarcasm. They were then taken along a series of passages to the Petite Force, which was reserved for women. There a motherly woman, with a daughter who seemed frightened, took charge of them. Their first impression of the place was of a nameless and horrible smell, aggravated by the heat of the evening. They asked the woman if they could have one cell. She replied that it was impossible, but that two of them could be together, and the third near by. Mme. de Mardecques and Antoinette went through the door of the first cell, and Gabrielle, waiting, had a glimpse of damp walls, a wooden chair, and two pallets which reeked of mouldy straw. The concierge made no attempt to interfere when Gabrielle embraced her aunt and her sister. She was crying, but Antoinette whispered: "Do not let anybody here see your tears."

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

Then Gabrielle was taken a few yards down the gloomy corridor to her own cell. When the door closed she sat down on the edge of the mattress, and looked up at the tiny barred window set high in the mildewed wall, and then down at the cracked uneven stone of the floor. She buried her face in her hands, not because she was frightened, but because she was lonely and unhappy, and because the sudden transition from the comfort which she had taken for granted to the filth and discomfort of the prison found her unprepared. She could hear the echo of a dog's bark, and a woman's laugh. Presently the frightened daughter of the concierge brought her a hunk of dirty bread, a plate of grey liquid with a few hard beans floating in it, and a little jug of water. The darkness gathered. Out in the street a voice was crying news, but she could not distinguish the words. The old woman, who said her name was Hanère, came to see her later on. "If you wish to be with the other two," she said, "tell the citizen Manuel when he makes his visit to-morrow." Gabrielle thanked her and asked if she might have a candle. This was brought to her, lighted, and she stuck it on the chair, lay down on her pallet, and read from the little volume of Malherbe's verses which she had brought with her. But her mind was not on what she read and after a while she closed the book, blew out the candle, and lay in the dark, waiting for sleep the consoler. But, weary though she was, she slept but fitfully.

Two days later, in the middle of the morning, the woman Hanère came to say that not Manuel, the Procurator of the Commune, had arrived, but Billaud-Varenne, his assistant. "Be careful of him," she said. "He is not so easy as the other."

Half an hour later there entered the cell a pale, dark man of middle age, with a slight squint, and an expression rather of cold indifference than of active cruelty. His hard mouth matched the impassibility of his dark eyes, and as

THE GASCON

she looked at him the girl said to herself: "He is not like a human being. He is like something in human form, but without a soul." This man, Billaud-Varenne, was accompanied by a secretary, who at once sat down at the small table and prepared paper, pen and ink. Gabrielle, who had been standing close to the wall, facing the door, did not change her position. Billaud-Varenne looked at her as impersonally as he looked at the table and the pallet. There was no hatred in his glance, but only complete lack of interest. The secretary, a handsome young man with a fresh complexion, made a sign that he was ready to take down the interrogation.

"You are the citizeness Vaudrelaine?"

"Yes."

"Where is your father?"

"I do not know."

"Where is your brother?"

"I do not know."

"But you know that your brother was in the Tuileries on August the tenth."

"I believe that to be true."

"When did you last see the citizen Prémoncourt?"

"I cannot say. Some time ago."

"He, too, was in the Tuileries on August the tenth, was he not?"

"Impossible."

"How, impossible? We know that he was there."

"He could not have been there. He was not in Paris."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know."

"Yet you know that he was not in Paris on August the tenth?"

"I have had letters from him both before and after August the tenth."

"Yet you do not know where he is?"

"The letters were brought to me by a friend."

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

"Who did not say where they came from."

"That is so."

"He has emigrated then, perhaps?"

"Certainly not. He supports the Revolution."

"How do you know this?"

"He has told me so."

"When?"

"As long as a year ago."

There was a pause. Billaud-Varenne had asked his questions in a dull, flat tone, as though he were not interested in the answers; as though the interrogation were a formality which bored him.

"You know why you are here?"

"Certainly I do. You do not need me to tell you that."

"That is for me to judge."

Again he paused, expecting her to answer his question. She met his eyes without fear, and was conscious that the secretary was looking at her with admiration.

"You yourself, I take it, do not support the Revolution?"

"Reverse our positions. Would you support the Revolution?"

He turned aside, making no answer, and glanced at the secretary's papers.

"Do you wish to make any complaints or requests?"

"I should like to be allowed to rejoin my aunt and my sister."

"If you take my advice, citizeness, and it is worth a good deal, you will have as little as possible to do with your sister. We have the Lamballe and the Tourzel and her daughter in this prison, but none of them has dared to be as insolent as your sister. You, I understand, are called Antoinette. Having such a name, you should tread warily, citizeness. I repeat, it might be unwise of you to press your demand to share a cell with your indiscreet sister."

THE GASCON

Before she could reply he had walked from the room, followed by the young secretary, who found time to smile timidly at her.

Some nights later Gabrielle was awakened by hysterical screaming. The next morning the woman Hanère explained that somebody had got hold of a rumour that the mobs were going to march against the prisons and massacre the prisoners, and that a woman had heard this and gone crazy with fear. Of course it was all nonsense. The prisons were properly guarded. No innocent person had anything to fear. "Then there are people imprisoned here who are innocent," said Gabrielle. The woman held up her finger to her mouth, and said no more.

Each day the women of the Petite Force were allowed a time for exercise in a small inner court of the prison. Gabrielle had heard from her sister and aunt an account of Antoinette's outburst. She said nothing of the mistake Billaud-Varenne had made with the two names, and had thought no more about it. Antoinette had told Billaud-Varenne that if she were the last woman left alive in France she would not attempt to disguise her contempt for their so-called Revolution, and Billaud-Varenne had replied: "You are not in the least likely to be the last woman left alive in France." All the women, at exercise, discussed the rumours of the moment, and Mme. de Lamballe told Mme. de Mardecques that she feared an incursion of the mob. The majority of the women in the prison were thieves and prostitutes, who found it very amusing to be walking about in the company of great ladies. They paid less attention to the rumours than to the bearing of the ladies.

When Félicien heard that Mme. de Mardecques and her nieces had been arrested, he lost no time in devising a scheme for their rescue. His first thought was of Birros, but that gentleman had gone into hiding, and had left no trace behind him. He would have been the very man to

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

carry out some audacious plan. Then Félicien recalled that one of his grooms, who was now in the National Guard, might be ready to help him. He was a capable young fellow called Planard, who never lost his head, and who had been as devoted to the Vaudrelaine family as he had to Félicien himself. He knew the girls, and the chances were that his work would give him some knowledge of what was going on in the prisons. He asked Planard to come by night to his apartment in the rue des Rosiers, and there they discussed what could be done. Planard guaranteed that, with a reasonable sum of money, he could enlist the help of two or three of his comrades, decent men who supported the Revolution but saw no reason for tyranny and injustice. Planard himself found a pretext for visiting the prison, and he reported that it would be utterly impossible to rescue the three ladies. The fact that Mme. de Lamballe and Mme. de Tourzel were among the prisoners meant that the authorities were keeping a very sharp watch on La Force, and that only trusted and incorruptible officials were employed there. Over and over again Félicien said he was prepared to spend all the money he had, but Planard merely shook his head and said: "There is no possible hope that way." Félicien then began to consider the wildest ideas. He would burn the place down, and get the ladies away in the midst of the panic. Or . . . But here Planard grew interested. "Panic is the word, Monsieur," he said. "We must create a disturbance." At the next meeting Planard said that there was talk of an attack on the prisons by the mob. He would know beforehand if the attack were to be made on La Force, because one of his friends was in the guard-house.

"That is taking a great risk," said Félicien. "We might be too late."

"What else can we do, Monsieur?" asked Planard.

"Well, suppose you get word of an attack by the mobs. What then?"

THE GASCON

" I and my friends will create a disturbance and get the ladies away."

" It sounds very simple, put like that," said Félicien.

" It will be very simple, Monsieur," said Planard.

" And to be ready for any emergency," said Félicien, " I will find somewhere for them to hide until I get them over the frontier."

Two nights later Planard said : " Whatever is going to happen will happen soon now, Monsieur."

" Are your friends ready ? "

" Yes, Monsieur."

" Good. There will be a carriage at the corner of the Place Beaudoyer as soon as I get word from you. It will bring them here."

On the morning of September 2nd, at an early hour, Planard, in rags, was among the crowd of men and women who were roving the streets in the neighbourhood of La Force, and he soon knew that tribunals were to be set up in the prisons, to try the prisoners. Sentence would be carried out immediately, and on the spot, in the courts or gardens of the prisons, or in the streets outside them. Somebody asked Planard what he had been paid for the job, and he discovered that each prison had a small number of murderers assigned to it, and that the usher Maillard was to play an important part as a judge. There was a great deal of drinking in the wine-shops and taverns, and all the men were armed with pistols or swords or axes or pikes or clubs. Several women mingled with the men, inflaming them with loud talk of the butchery to come. From time to time unpaid assistants joined the group to which Planard had attached himself, and nobody asked for their credentials.

Planard had already sent word by one of his friends to Félicien, saying, " It is for to-day."

In his previous exploration of the prison, on the pretext of delivering wine to his friend in the guard-house, Planard

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

had discovered the cells of the ladies, but had, of course, made no attempt to see their occupants. He had arranged that morning, as soon as he knew what was going to happen, that when the crowd entered the prison, the two friends who accompanied him should hang about the corridors, shouting insults at the prisoners. He himself would be in or near the room where the tribunal sat. When the ladies were brought up for their "trial" he was still to be at hand, while the other two fired shots, shouted, and raised the alarm at the far side of the prison.

In the late afternoon a number of the more important prisoners were brought from their cells and herded into a narrow passage. By twos and threes they were then pushed through a door. Mme. de Mardecques and her two nieces had contrived to keep together, and when they went through the door they found themselves in a dark and suffocatingly hot room. In the middle of it there was a long table, and on the table two or three dirty pieces of candle stuck in the necks of bottles. Round the table were gathered some dozen men. Some sat, some sprawled over the table; one was snorting in a drunken sleep, with his head on his arms. The smell of stale drink and dirty clothes and bodies was almost insufferable, and the voices and faces of the men struck the hearts of the ladies with sudden panic. All the men were talking at once, most of them in a vocabulary confined to oaths and blasphemies. For the first time the prisoners were face to face with the scum of the streets and completely at the mercy of a mob. Some of the men carried clubs, one had a naked sword, another a hatchet. On one man's clothes were dark stains and from him came the reek of blood. They apparently imagined that they were some kind of tribunal, met to dispense justice, for they were crowding round a large book on the table — the prison register. The man who sat opposite to the book was dressed in the uniform of the National Guard and he

THE GASCON

at last succeeded in restoring order, but from the way he consulted the register it was evident that he could barely read. Moreover, his fellows hung over him and jabbed at the names with their dirty thumbs. When he saw the three ladies, he shouted : " Who are these ? " " Call the roll, that's the way to do it," yelled a voice from the door. And then the uproar began. " Why waste time ? " " Kill 'em all." " Justice is what we want, and quickly ! " " Shout out a name, citizen. We'll do the rest." But the citizen was not only illiterate but half-drunk, and had no idea which names had been dealt with. Pale and terrified, the three ladies shrank against the wall, while the men in their squabbling seemed to forget they were there. Only now did Gabrielle realize that the indiscretions of her sister would be attributed to her and that, whatever fate awaited Antoinette and her aunt, she herself was doomed. When she admitted this fact to herself, a kind of exaltation seized her. She thought of all the men and women who had faced death unflinchingly and cheated the mobs of their pleasure by showing no hint of fear. And she determined to die, if she must die, as the tradition of her blood demanded. Mme. de Mardecques and Antoinette, standing beside her, saw her move a pace from the slimy wall and stand erect and very still.

The man in the uniform shouted, " Who are these three ? Who brought them here ? "

One of the two men who had taken them from the cells answered.

" Well, their names, imbecile ! "

" Vaudulard, citizen President," muttered the man.

The " President of the Tribunal " consulted the register, but at that moment a great banging and shouting broke out inside the prison, and a shot was fired. " Au secours ! " cried a loud voice. " To my help or these sows will escape ! " Then more banging and clattering and shouting. The President rose and, as he did so, a ragged wretch appeared

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

in the doorway and yelled : " So you sit here, citizens, while the prisoners break out and massacre us ! They have killed two of our men already." He was answered by a storm of oaths, and the President and his jury dashed for the door, led by the man who had brought the news. The three prisoners were forgotten, but when they saw that the room was empty, they were unable to move, from fear. Then there came a soft step to the door, and a villainous-looking rascal with a slit cheek and a grimy face, and clothes hanging in tatters, appeared in the doorway. He had a wine-bottle in one hand, and a bloodstained hatchet in the other. The three women cowered back against the wall at the sight of him. But he placed his finger to his lips and said in a whisper : " It is Planard. Follow me and do exactly what I tell you." But the man whom they remembered as a groom at Prémoncourt was almost unrecognizable, and they hesitated, fearing a trap.

" There is not a moment to lose," he said. " Two of my friends have created the disturbance. The way is clear, but you must come quickly."

As they followed him through the door and out into a corridor they could hear men shouting all over the prison. When they came to the end of the corridor, and to another door, Planard said, " This opens on to the street. Trust me, and try not to show fear, whatever happens." But before he could open this door, it was pushed wide from outside, and a big-boned man with a sword said : " Ah, at last ! What is delaying justice ? We have had nobody sent out since that last batch." Then he called over his shoulder, " Get ready, citizens. Another batch ! "

" No, citizen," said Planard. " These are acquitted, curse them."

A roar of rage greeted these words, and a small group of men with two women among them gathered round the door. " It's prisoners escaping," shouted one of the women. " Cut them down ! Scrape their hearts out ! " " Who

THE GASCON

acquitted the vermin?" bellowed a broad-shouldered ruffian with a great chopper in his hand. "The citizen President, may he rot!" said Planard.

While this was going on the three ladies knew that at any moment the disturbance in the prison might be over, and then their attempted escape would be discovered.

The woman who had spoken before pushed to the front and spat at Mme. de Mardecques. "Anyone can see these are not patriots," she said. "And how do we know you are a patriot? There's something fishy about all this. Why has there been such delay, and what was the noise we heard?"

"There was a difference of opinion in there," said Planard. "Some of us wanted things done more quickly, but the citizens in there insisted on questions and answers, just like a trial. They've acquitted six more people."

"Oho!" said one of the men. "So that's the game, is it? Well, we have a word to say about that. Do you hold these three until we come back."

Planard pushed Gabrielle out of the door and spat and cursed. "So," he said, "it seems you won't go free after all, my fine bird. Well, that suits me."

Meanwhile the group swayed through the door and dashed down the corridor. Only the woman seemed to suspect the whole story, but she was pulled roughly through the door by one of the men.

"Quick," said Planard, and he walked rapidly across the little yard, and through a gate into the street. There was a drunken man with a pike in the street and he shouted to Planard: "Have they cried 'Vive la Nation!' That's my orders for all that don't get their throats cut. Look, ladies." He pointed to a corner of the street wall where there was a pile of bodies, some of them headless.

"To escape that," he said, "is worth a little civility."

Mme. de Mardecques, supported by Gabrielle and Planard, was half swooning. Antoinette had stopped and

THE PRISON OF LA FORCE

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder and bade her not delay. She would have waited for her sister, but Planard dragged her after him, round the corner into a broader street, where a carriage was waiting.

"Come, pretty one," said the pikeman, "say 'Vive la Nation!' and you shall have a kiss and a cuddle."

Antoinette did not move back when he advanced towards her. She looked him full in the eyes and cried loudly, "Vive le Roi!" The pike, thrust at her repeatedly, pierced her body, and she fell with a low moan, and the man went on jabbing at her until she lay still. Her cry and what followed were drowned by the wheels of the carriage as the driver whipped up his horse. Mme. de Mardecques had fainted and Planard was holding Gabrielle with all his strength, to prevent her jumping out of the carriage and going back for her sister.

When the carriage had reached the Quai des Armes, the driver, who had sat rigid in his seat, never turning his head at the cries of Gabrielle, suddenly pulled up, and looked round. Gabrielle uttered an exclamation and stopped struggling.

"Félicien!" she said.

"Where is Antoinette?"

Gabrielle buried her face in her hands.

"Planard," said Félicien, "take my place. Throw my coat over you to disguise those rags. It will soon be dark. Let nobody into my apartment."

"Monsieur," said Planard, "I will go back. But it is hopeless. Nothing can be done."

"You mean——?"

"She stayed behind."

"Take my place, Planard. There may have been a Revolution, but I still give the orders."

Félicien got down from the driver's seat and tossed his coat to Planard, who took his place and drove off.

In the gathering darkness Félicien walked back the way

THE GASCON

the carriage had come. The rue du Roi was deserted and there was silence round the prison. He had no idea what he intended to do. He only knew that he would not desert her. If she was to die, he would die with her. Half-way along the street a lamp had been lit on a bracket, and in its light he found her lying as though asleep. But when he knelt beside her, he saw that her face was covered with blood and disfigured and her body broken with wounds. He lifted her gently and carried her in the darkness of the narrow streets to a little cemetery, where an old gravedigger had his house. The gravedigger opened a small mortuary chapel and there they left her, with candles burning at her head and feet, while they went out to the plot of burial-ground and dug a grave. Side by side they worked in silence, the old man asking no questions and ignoring all formalities of registration and certificate, but accepting the strange happenings of terrible times. He was given to understand that he had found the body outside the chapel, if enquiries were made, since others might be traced and brought to their death if the truth were told. The old man promised to procure a coffin and was given a sum of money. In the candlelit chapel Félicien said his farewell, and his prayers for the dead, and went away under the September night like a blind man.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FÉLICIEN GOES TO HEAR SAINT-JUST IN THE CONVENTION

ONE day, under the arcades of the Palais-Royal, Félicien had bought a little book called *Esprit de la Révolution et de la Constitution de France*. It was an essay divided into five parts, and full of penetrating judgments. As Félicien

FÉLICIEN GOES TO HEAR SAINT-JUST

read on he realized that he had at last found something more satisfying than the usual run of revolutionary writings. The writer made an attempt to present the Revolution as something more than the destruction of a system of government which had outlived its day ; to explain it as a regeneration. He welcomed the Revolution, but dismissed the idea of a Republic as being an unsuitable form of Government for the French. He supported the Constitution of 1791, and was a monarchist, like nearly all Frenchmen at that time. After the long centuries of Monarchy it was impossible to imagine the country under any other form of government. His remarks on taxation, on liberty, on justice, appeared to be worthy of prolonged study. And when he said, " A free man prefers poverty to humiliation ", Félicien found himself wishing that he could talk with such a man face to face.

The author's name was Saint-Just and Félicien had heard that he was but twenty-four years old. The name meant little to him, until he heard it again in October of 1792, when all Paris was discussing the speech of an unknown youngster demanding the death of Louis XVI. Félicien remembered that Saint-Just had called for a constitutional monarchy. But he also remembered that since the book was written many had changed their views. Varennes had intervened. The treachery of the King and Queen was known. They had called on foreign armies to invade France. There had been the terrible spectacle of French noblemen marching with these foreign armies, to invade their own country. But round Saint-Just's name rolled a violent controversy. Some called him a cold-blooded savage ; others praised him as an astute polemist who had seen the logical development of France's situation, and now urged her to go forward to complete and establish the Revolution on a basis of just laws, rather than to retreat and admit that all had been done wrong. Some were appalled at his ruthless and uncompromising mind ; others

THE GASCON

were disarmed by his eloquence, by his mastery of the spoken word.

Félicien decided, therefore, to go to the Convention, to see and to hear this man in whom he was becoming more and more interested, and it was on a November day, in the year 1792, that he found himself waiting, with a kind of excitement, while the uninteresting routine work was disposed of. Presently there was a stir on the benches of the Mountain, and a tall young man, well-dressed and of an athletic grace, disengaged himself from his fellows and walked to the tribune. And as he mounted the steps Félicien seemed to recognize that handsome face, that proud bearing. Where had he seen this man before? Then he remembered the road from Manicamp to Blérancourt two and a half years before, and the young dandy surrounded by peasants, and he remembered, too, how the old groom had told him the young man's name: Saint-Just of Blérancourt. This was he who had said, "Happiness is a new idea in Europe." Félicien kept his eyes fixed upon him as he prepared to speak. He saw the carefully tended brown hair, the cold eyes with their direct gaze, the slim erect figure. He noted that the tall collar of the blue coat and the enormous white cravat emphasized the stiffness and disdain of his attitude, and he observed the sensitive and almost effeminate mouth which contrasted so oddly with those stern eyes. It was the face of a poet — or, rather, it was what the face of a young poet might have become under the influence of controlled passion. A poet had seen a vision, and had been transformed into a man of action.

The General Council of the Commune had sent a deputation to the Convention, calling the attention of the deputies to the miseries of the poor, so largely due to uncontrolled speculation, and had suggested the taxation of certain commodities. The young orator replied to this deputation. Félicien, watching him, was prepared for rhetoric, and half expected to see this splendid newcomer triumph over

FÉLICIEEN GOES TO HEAR SAINT-JUST

the Assembly by a fiery and furious denunciation of the kind to which all assemblies were accustomed at this time. He was not prepared for close reasoning ; for a matter-of-fact, unemphatic delivery, without gesture or animation. And Saint-Just had been speaking for some minutes before Félicien was aware of the solemn music of the prose, and the power of complete sincerity which gave a beauty to the clear but not very loud voice. And he noticed that every now and then the speaker lifted his right hand shoulder-high and let it fall again to his side. Otherwise he stood in magnificent serenity ; and his hearers were held. Many of the things he said might have served as texts for a hundred other speeches. His ideas bred ideas, as when he said that those who made the Revolution had been so enthralled with the abstract idea of liberty, the principles of freedom, that the principles of good government had been neglected. Occasionally he changed his style, as when he warned them that unless the financial position were taken in hand, liberty would pass like a storm, and its triumph like a single clap of thunder. But the thread that held the whole speech together was his expressed conviction that the Republic must be founded securely and strongly upon wise and just laws ; that there was a task of creation to be undertaken before the quarrels of factions should have a chance to jeopardize what had already been done in the name of liberty. For his was a mind that loved order, the Roman order, a strong will expressing itself in determined action. Félicien saw that the Girondins were impressed by the speech, and Brissot was listening intently.

Félicien sat forward when Saint-Just said that there could be no unity while the King remained alive, and everybody present realized that he was referring to the quarrel between the Mountain and the Girondins.

Once again, in December, Félicien went to hear this man speak. He heard him stake his whole belief in the Revolution on what he was doing. If the King, he said, is

innocent, the Sovereign People are guilty. He asked them whether the Revolution was the downfall of Monarchy and the abolition of abuses — mere destruction — or was it something nobler? “*La Révolution commence quand le tyran finit.*” And he bade those who disagreed with him be sincere enough to say to Europe: “Follow your Kings when they lead you against us, for we are rebels.”

When Félicien left the Convention on this second occasion he knew that he had become subject to an influence which would disturb him for many a day. Had anybody told him a month ago that he would listen with admiration to a man who called for the murder of the King, he would have dismissed such a thing as a wild impossibility. And even now, while still under the spell of great oratory, his mind gave no consent to the crime that was contemplated. But he had at last heard a voice speaking lucidly and without bombast for the people. He had heard a constructive critic of the Revolution. And he had become aware of something in himself which answered this man's summons, and, reluctantly, accepted him as a leader. He saw clearly the dilemma. Either the Revolution was right, and must proceed, or wrong, and must be stamped upon. There could be no compromise now. Once there might have been compromise. Mirabeau might have achieved, for a while, the victory of both sides. But what had followed the King and Queen had brought upon themselves. Félicien now asked himself a question: Would the man who loved France fight against the Kings in coalition, who were intent on preserving their own privileges, and on bringing the French people to heel, or would he fight against his own people to fasten down upon them once more the burden against which they had rebelled? He said to himself as he asked this question: “The decision to be made is not as simple as that.” But it began to seem as though it was as simple as that. The Manifesto of Brunswick, he reflected, should have made it as simple as that, five months ago.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF, MEETS A LADY, AND BECOMES HER BROTHER

BIRROS had no sooner opened the door of the lodging where he had gone into hiding after August 10th than he knew that he had put his head into a trap. Outside, a foot from the threshold, stood an official in a tricolour sash. Behind him were two scowling attendants, each with a brace of pistols in his belt. At the foot of the stairs, in talk with the concierge, were a couple of soldiers with muskets. "Five to one," said Birros to himself.

"Citizen Birros, I believe," said the official.

"What makes you think that?" asked Birros, smiling merrily.

"Citizen Birros, there is an order for your arrest." He consulted a smudged paper which he had taken out of his hat. "The citizeness Carroulet testifies that you were among those who fired upon the people on August the tenth. The citizen Madoc testifies that you were in the Palace of the Tuileries upon that date. The citizens Gros, Barbet and Chicour report that you were in the habit of consorting with the enemies of the people; with the aristocrats Mardèques, Prémoncourt and Vaudrelaine, and many others either suspected of treason or consorting with traitors. The citizen Hirsch testifies that you called the citizen Marat a filthy toad, and spat at the mention of his name. The citizen Verdreuil testifies . . ."

Birros stood with folded arms, appearing to listen to the catalogue of his misdeeds, but he was quietly taking stock of his situation. The official was a young man of medium size and appeared to be intelligent. His two attendants were powerfully built. One looked intensely stupid and lymphatic, a slow-witted yokel. The other was more alert and was watching Birros closely, as though he were used to this job.

THE GASCON

Behind Birros, across some six feet of floor, was the door into his bedroom — and in that room were his pistols and his sword. At the other end of the bedroom a short ladder led up to an attic which opened on to the roof. Without the pistols of his opponents he would have backed himself to escape, for the door into the bedroom was a narrow one and so easily defended ; only one man could attack at a time. But the pistols changed everything. However, he hit on a plan. The main thing was that he intended to make a fight of it.

The official finished his reading and looked up from the paper questioningly.

“ I am surprised,” said Birros good-naturedly, “ at the incapacity of your spies. How little they have found out about me.”

“ You can save your jesting,” said the official, “ for the Tribunal. They are in the mood to appreciate a jest,” he added grimly.

“ I am permitted to take a change of linen ? ”

“ Certainly.”

Now Birros entertained no hope that he would be permitted to walk into the bedroom, out of it, up the ladder, and away. He was prepared for what happened.

“ Laroche,” said the official, and made a movement of his head, indicating that the more alert of the two big men was to accompany Birros into the bedroom and keep him under observation.

“ We shall rejoin you in a few moments, then,” said Birros, grinning broadly as the crisis of action approached. He moved in a leisurely fashion towards the door of his bedroom, and Laroche followed him.

“ You are doubtless armed — you have arms in there ? ” asked the official.

Birros turned a beaming face to him. “ They are at your disposal,” he said. “ Or, rather, at the disposal of citizen Laroche.”

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF

He continued to walk towards the door which was half open. Laroche, behind him, had covered him with one of his pistols. Birros passed through the door and bent over the stool where his sword and pistols lay. Turning, and still grinning, he offered the hilt of his sword to Laroche, with a bow, and shot him through the heart. Before he could get to the door to slam and bolt it, the official had dashed in and caught the point of the sword in his throat. He went down, and the foolish attendant followed and fell over him, and was stunned by a blow on the head from the butt of a pistol. Birros dragged the bodies across the threshold and bolted the door. "So far, so good," he said to himself, and as he went up the ladder and raised the trap-door which opened on the roof, he heard the two soldiers come clattering into the outer apartment, bawling: "In the name of the Nation!"

Darkness was falling as he emerged on to the roof. There were already a few stars. He went along by the coping as rapidly as he could, and, as the roofs were continuous, he was thus able to travel the entire street until he came to the last house in the row. There, craning over the edge, he found himself with a drop of forty or fifty feet, and nothing to break his fall. "I can jump into the street," said Birros, "or into the yard at the back of the house — and either way I can break my neck in comparative safety." Time pressed. If the two soldiers had any sense, they would not follow him along the roofs. They would know that sooner or later he must come down. One of them would remain to watch the street, which was quite a short one, while the other went for help. And the soldiers indeed had plenty of sense, and did that very thing. For when Birros leaned over to examine the chances of a leap to the street, there was soldier number one on the watch below, and about thirty yards to the left. Birros crossed the roof and looked down on the yard at the back. It was growing darker, but he could see enough to persuade him that a

THE GASCON

leap to the ground was out of the question. As he moved, he loosened a slate, a fragment of which tinkled into the guttering. Right under his feet, it seemed, a window went up, and a woman's voice cried, "Manon, my little angel of a devil of a cat, you have come back then?"

"Miaow," said Birros in his ordinary voice.

"My God! A robber!" said the woman.

"Be reassured, dear lady," said Birros. "Only an unfortunate lover."

The woman leaned far out and looked up. Birros craned down as far as he dared and saw a handsome face beneath beautiful dark hair. About the lips and in the eyes there was humour.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"A quarrel. A tiff. She said if I really loved her I would try to dash myself from the roof when she was angry with me. I said, that is exactly how I feel. And I went up through her trap-door on to the roof, and I've no doubt she's ready to fall into my arms again by now, and is terrified lest I throw myself into the street."

"And where do I come in?"

"A rope, a knotted sheet, some way of coming to earth."

"You couldn't lower yourself on to this sill?"

"I could not, even if I were Manon. A twelve-foot drop and an eighth of an inch to land on!"

"Wait, I will see."

"You are adorable."

"So they tell me."

The minutes passed and Birros, crouching in the gathering darkness, so that he could not be seen from the street, began to wonder whether the pretty girl had not betrayed him. But he remembered the humour in her eyes and her voice, and he told himself that traitresses are not made in that fashion; they are embittered and something inhuman. But, after all, he asked himself, what the devil can she do to help me down? A pity there is no trap-door. He was

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF

still meditating when he heard a whisper.

"Cat, cat, are you still up there?"

"Miaow," replied Birros.

"Then here is something better than a saucer of milk."

Leaning over, he saw that this remarkable lady was trailing the end of a rope from her window.

"Now how on earth does such a one as you happen to have a rope handy?" asked Birros.

"Perhaps I am the hangman's darling," she replied.

"But catch this when I fling it up. I will hold my end tightly."

"That is a sound idea anyhow," said Birros sarcastically.

"But to me that rope does not look strong enough to hang a mouse."

"Then, are we to wait for a thicker rope?"

"I shall not have to wait long for all the rope I want if I linger here much longer. Swing it up to me, sweet one."

The first time it came nowhere within his reach.

"Concentrate, concentrate, my ringdove," said Birros.

The second throw went wider still.

"Clearly you have never rescued a man from a roof before," said Birros.

"Stop talking," she said, "and catch the rope, monster of the night."

The third time he caught it.

"I will tie my end round the chimney-stack. There is plenty to spare," he said. "Let your end dangle free. Now. Prepare my saucer of milk. I will be with you in a moment, exquisite creature."

It was an easy descent. The rope was stouter than it looked. Birros swung himself in at the open window and found himself in a small, comfortably furnished room. Candles were burning, and beside a table on which were a bottle of wine and some food and two places set, his hostess stood smiling frankly at him. He saw that she was extremely beautiful and as gay as a cricket.

THE GASCON

"How on earth did you get that rope?" asked Birros.

"From a big box of my sister's, sent by the diligence from Provins."

"And this" — he indicated the wine and food — "is for me?"

"It was intended for my husband, but you got here first."

"You amaze me," said Birros. "My name is Armand Birros."

"And mine Chélidoine Rozérieulles."

Birros bowed.

"There is blood all over you," she said. "Did the lady stab you?"

Her eyes were impudent, but her face was now grave. "One does not lie to such women in matters of importance," said Birros to himself.

"I had to kill a soldier," he said. "Possibly two. This damned Revolution of theirs will be the death of me."

"You were denounced to Fouquier-Tinville?"

"I suppose so."

"And you are a royalist?"

"I am nothing. I only ask to be left in peace to follow my own adventures."

Then she began to laugh. "My husband," she said, "is a member of the Tribunal, and he will be here in half an hour or so. Of course, you had to choose his house as a refuge."

Birros was laughing, too. In some way, he realized, he and she were complementary. Here was a girl who thought danger a jesting matter, and had the courage to laugh at the man who had fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire, instead of thinking of her own peril, or getting into a panic over his.

"Ventreguienne!" said Birros. "Why have we not met before, we two?"

"Because," she answered, "it has not occurred to you

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF

until to-night to prowl about on my roof. But now there is much to do, and little time to do it in. We must get rid of those bloody clothes, and change your appearance. I have a brother, a farmer in the Limousin, and I should not be surprised if he had turned up here this evening. My husband has never met him. They will be delighted to meet each other."

"And how, my darling sister," asked Birros, "do you propose to get clothes for me?"

"Nothing is easier, dear brother," she said. "On the floor below lives an hysterical creature who makes clothes for actors and actresses. You must have a little beard, I think." She put her head on one side and looked at him. Her gaiety delighted him. "That carrot-hair must turn black. By the way, if it comes to fighting, what weapon have you?"

"None. I think I had my sword when I climbed the roof, but it's gone now. And I left my pistols behind."

"Well, I will be off. Don't stir from here. And if my husband enters, hit him hard on the jaw. But not too hard. He is a small man, and rather nervous, so do not be too rough with him."

She was back in ten minutes, which time Birros had employed in wondering how long his luck would hold. She bundled him into a bedroom, and, when he had put on the heavy brown country clothes, she took his blood-stained ones away and fitted the black beard on his chin, the bushy eyebrows over his own, and the black wig over his red hair. She stood back from him, satisfied that the beard, by giving his face a more oval shape, changed his appearance. She took away his hat, but he kept the feather which his mother had given him.

"It is your ridiculous nose which gives you away," she said. "I shall call you Camus."

"You should have brought me a cardboard one of the aquiline type," he said.

THE GASCON

"Alas ! My friend has no noses handy."

Birros surveyed himself in a mirror. Then he turned and, opening his arms wide, roared : " My sister ! My favourite sister ! My little beauty ! " And, advancing on her, he kissed her heartily, repeatedly, and with great vigour. Nor did she fail to do her share, and with evident enjoyment.

Then she said : " It is dark outside. He will come soon. Sprawl in that chair and, when I hear his step and give you the signal, follow my lead. I shall speak loud enough for him to hear me before he comes through the door."

" How entrancing you are," said Birros.

" You must not find me so when once we begin to play our parts."

" And how do I get out of here ? "

" Leave that to me, dear Camus."

Birros lay back in a chair and tried to think himself into the part of the big brother from the country. And, as he waited, he heard a step on the stair, and the lady slipped into an adjoining room, her finger on her lips. And only then did he see the rope dangling outside the window, with the candlelight falling on it. In one bound he was at the window. He seized the rope and exerted all his strength to break it from its mooring. It broke — and so did the chimney-stack. There was a clattering and a banging, under cover of which he crossed to the door of the adjoining room, and said to the girl, " My ringdove, we forgot the rope. I've seen to it." " So I perceive," she replied, with a laugh. The step was outside the door now, and Chélidoine called out : " Brother Paul, what on earth was that ? " " An earthquake, I think, my darling sister," answered Birros, who was standing looking up at the ceiling as the door opened and citizen Rozérieulles of the Tribunal walked quickly in.

One glance at the fussy individual who entered was enough to convince Birros that he disliked the husband as strongly as he liked the wife. His little sharp nose, his

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF

beady, restless eyes, his thin, tight lips, all proclaimed the man of law, and proved that the stage-version of him did not lie. He wore his respectable clothes neatly and pedantically, and there was a smell of parchment about him. The first instinct of Birros was to pick up this pettifogging intruder and throw him out of the window. And to add to the temptation, the little man ran silently across the room and craned out. Then he looked upwards, and cocked his head to listen like a thrush after a worm. The rattle and clatter of the falling chimney had ceased and the bricks and rubble had settled in the yard below. It was too dark to see what had become of the rope.

"You are——" asked the little man.

"Your brother-in-law, citizen. But you are disturbed?"

"Chélidoine!" called the little man.

"Here I am, Anatole. What is all the fuss?"

She walked calmly into the room and stared at him.

"That madman is somewhere close at hand. He must have fallen and killed himself. You heard the crash. Anyhow, the street is full of soldiers. They will find him, alive or dead."

"What madman?" asked Chélidoine. "And what is he up to?"

"An escaped prisoner. They say he killed the man who arrested him. But they've found his sword and his pistols, so he's unarmed."

He took no notice of Birros, until Chélidoine went and stood beside her "brother" and placed his arm round her waist and laid her head on his shoulder.

"So long since I have seen Paul," she said.

"When did you arrive, citizen?" asked Rozérieulles.

"Four hours ago," said Birros.

"You are making a long stay?"

"A week only. I am bound for friends at Meaux."

Rozérieulles obviously had no interest in the brother or his doings. Nor in the food and wine. He sat down at a

THE GASCON

table, pulled some papers out of a wallet, and began to read. In a few moments there were steps on the stairs, and voices. Then a knock on the door. Rozérieulles rose to open it.

"Your pardon for disturbing you, citizen Rozérieulles. The man we are looking for cannot be far away. You have not heard or seen anything unusual, since you returned?"

"That crash on the roof, sergeant, seemed to be pretty well overhead. Have you men on the roof?"

"On the roof, and in the street."

"This is my brother-in-law," said Rozérieulles, noticing the direction of the sergeant's glance.

Behind the sergeant were four men with muskets. One of them carried the lost sword of Birros.

At that moment another soldier appeared in the doorway.

"The chimney-stack above is smashed, sergeant," he said. "All the yards at the back of the houses are being searched."

"Citizen Rozérieulles — sergeant," said Birros, "I do not wish to interfere in what is no concern of mine, but I have an idea. Where was this man arrested?"

"At a house along the street. He escaped and got out along the roof."

"Well, now, he knows that there is a search for him, and he knows that the least likely place to be searched is the house he escaped from. If he is a sensible fellow, he will go back to it, and lie quiet for a bit. Also, citizen Rozérieulles says he is unarmed. His sword has been found, but he may have other weapons hidden there. Another reason to return. My advice is: surround that house, and then break in, before daylight comes. The darkness is his friend."

"Not a bad idea," said the sergeant.

Rozérieulles nodded. He wanted to get back to his papers.

"One moment," said Birros, "this man will be desperate. That sword one of your men is carrying — the prisoner's,

BIRROS PROWLs ON A ROOF

I presume — will be in the way. We could do with it here, in case of trouble. I suggest you leave it with us for the time being.”

The sergeant looked towards Rozérieulles for his orders. He received a curt nod, and the soldier put down sword and belt.

“ Now,” said Birros, “ we can be responsible for this house, and you can withdraw men for your operation.”

Again the sergeant looked at Rozérieulles. And again a nod signified assent. But the crabbed, prematurely middle-aged notary suddenly seemed to realize that the newcomer, his brother-in-law, was presuming too much on family ties. He attempted to assert himself in front of the soldiers.

“ You take a great deal upon yourself, Monsieur my brother-in-law,” he said.

Birros tried to look crestfallen. A lion might as easily have tried to look timid.

“ Citizen Rozérieulles,” he said, “ I must beg you to excuse my too great zeal. I am strange to the capital, and find myself almost at once given the chance to help to bring one of these accursed enemies of the Nation to justice. Can you blame me, if I lose my head ? ”

Rozérieulles was satisfied with this humble speech, and he dismissed the soldiers, bidding them leave the sword. All this while Chélidoine had been busying herself in the next room. She now emerged again.

Birros said, “ My wood-pigeon, I must go seek my friends.”

Her husband had returned to his papers.

“ I will put you upon your way,” said Chélidoine.

Rozérieulles looked up to say good-bye to Birros, who, when the husband's head was once more lowered over his work, took his sword and beckoned to Chélidoine. Together they passed out. On the landing Birros said : “ What the devil got into your head to make you — you, of all women — marry that bag of lard ? ”

THE GASCON

“ Cannot you see it was love at first sight ? ” she said, as they went quietly down the stairs.

When they came to the entrance, they could hear the tramp of the soldiers up the street. Birros drew her back from the threshold and there was more hearty kissing. Then Birros slipped along the street, keeping close to the wall, and ready to sell his life dearly if anybody challenged him.

Chélidoine discovered that the beard had come off in her hand during the valedictory horseplay, but he had gone too far along the street for her to call to him. So she tucked this unusual trophy of love into her corsage and, with an amused smile, returned to the more recondite charms of her disgusting prig of a husband.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PURSUIT

It was highly characteristic of the Béarnais that, after clinging to the wall and walking with circumspection for some hundreds of yards, he tired of what he regarded as a comedy and began to laugh at himself for his cautiousness. Two streets away from the scene of his adventure he snatched off wig and eyebrows and threw them into the gutter. As though relieved of an intolerable burden, he strode forward through the dark streets, openly, and humming an air. He remembered that there was a tavern near by where they sold the wine of his own country ; and there is nothing, he told himself, so brings to an exile the sights and sounds of home as the wine made by his own people. The man who kept the tavern was a surly Fleming from Courtrai, but he had married a motherly, serene Béarnaise, whose father owned a vineyard hard by Bellocq, and did business

THE PURSUIT

with the Fleming. Hither Birros repaired to slake his thirst, intending to lie there quietly until the hue and cry had died down. For he had no intention of getting flung into prison.

He reckoned without his host, who, on the following day, while gossiping with his cronies at a street market near at hand, heard a good deal of what had occurred and held his peace. It seemed to him that there was money to be made by not sharing his valuable information with anybody. And so, on the third day, when the impatient Birros was wondering how soon he might come out of hiding, the good Béarnaise crept quietly up the stairs to his room, tapped on the door, and entered.

"You must go at once," said she.

"What?" cried Birros. "Am I never to be allowed to stay in one place at my ease? What is it now?"

"They are coming to arrest you," said she.

"How the devil do they know I am here?"

"Someone has informed," said she, well knowing who it was.

"Oho," said Birros. "Then I must be on my travels again."

There were no belongings to collect, since he had not ventured out to replenish his wardrobe. The woman led him quietly down a back staircase, through a dark cellar, and out of a door which opened on to a small space enclosed by crumbling walls. In one wall there was a low door, which the woman opened for him, after they had clambered over a pile of refuse. She pushed him through and wished him godspeed, blessing herself as he peered out into a narrow alley. The next moment he drew back swiftly. "They've lost no time," he said. "There's a man at the far end of the alley."

"Already!"

"I saw nobody at the other end. I must run for it, good mother."

THE GASCON

So saying he blew a kiss to the kindly woman, stepped through the door, and took to his heels. Ahead of him the alley was deserted, and he had almost reached the point where it turned into a broader street when there was a loud shout. Birros increased his speed. In the broader street he had to push people to right and left, and he explained his haste as he ran, by crying : " Oh, she will die ! Shall I be in time ? Your pardon, sir ! Your pardon, Madame ! Oh, my poor old grandmother ! It is a matter of life and death. . . ." " Indeed it is," he added, to himself. So, bounding along he outpaced whatever pursuit there was, and presently came to a neat little square packed with people. They were all gathered round a booth, where a quack was endeavouring to sell his wares. Only the face and shoulders of the quack were visible, as he stood on a curtained box. The curtains were of a shabby green, and embroidered with the signs of the Zodiac, and a placard in front of the booth announced that Dr. Ricoforax was in session. Now Birros was familiar with the tricks of the trade, having many a time watched such shows in the pleasant town of Oloron, near his home. His plan was made in an instant, as he worked his way through the crowd, and round to the back of the booth. Once there, he got down on all-fours, and tugged at the quack's curtains, interrupting a flow of talk about a cure for warts. He dragged the man out of sight behind the cart which was his travelling apothecary's shop, and broke the news bluntly to him that he must take his place for a wager. The poor fellow was dazed by this sudden attack, and agreed to say nothing, especially as Birros promised that the takings would be his, down to the last sou. And so, in a very short time, prompted by Birros, the learned Dr. Ricoforax bobbed up on his box, and announced that his place would be taken by his pupil, the young Dr. Nostradamus. He then stepped down, and Birros took his place. There were two slits in the curtain for his arms, and he now held up a box of pills

THE PURSUIT

in each hand and commenced his patter.

“ What is melancholy, my very good friends and clients ? It is, according to Alcibiades, a distillation of vapour from the face of the moon, when she is in her third quarter, which descends upon the spleen and produces what we of the faculty term *Moestitia Melancholica*, as discoursed upon in the third book of Seneca’s *De Pharmacopolio Percipiendo*. Now the only sovereign remedy for melancholy is a concoction of pellitory, spurge and bullace, discovered by my learned master, Dr. Ricoforax of the Faculty, who has made a present of his discovery to the University of Padua. One of these pills, taken at the dark of the moon, cured a great lady of the Vivarais in four hours, so that she was never again melancholy. And to prove the good faith of my master, I propose, with his full approval, to give away ten of the pills from the box to the ten most melancholic members of my learned audience.”

There were exclamations of disapproval from behind the curtain, where the learned Dr. Ricoforax was listening. Meanwhile, in the pause that followed this handsome and unselfish offer, Birros was watching the entrance to the square, over the heads of the audience. So far there was no sign of any pursuit. The pursuers must have gone off on a false trail.

Birros repeated his offer of the pills, but nobody stirred. They all stood and gaped. Then there was a scuffle on the left of the audience, and an evil-looking man pushed a youngster forward. There was loud laughter as the lout shuffled up to the outstretched hand of Nostradamus, and received two pills. He went ashamedly back to his place, and Birros, seizing a chance to get the crowd on his side with a laugh, said loudly : “ The melancholy engendered by love is but a branch of the great subject of human feeble-mindedness. Yonder lad will awake to-morrow with the heart of a lion, and will take his mistress with a merry roar.”

THE GASCON

When the laughter subsided Birros brandished the other box of pills.

"Now," said he, "what have I in this other hand? What but another miraculous compound, the fruit of six years' unending toil by my learned master, Dr. Ricoforax? It is the Milk of Archimago, mentioned by Diodorus Siculus in his *Pragmatics*, the recipe for which was destroyed in the burning of Smyrna described by St. Polycarp in his *Enchiridion Diabolorum*. What does this milk, concentrated in the form of a pill, do for the unfortunate human race? It is an infallible cure for affections of the memory. It is a purge of the brain. For him who takes this cure nothing need be forgotten any more, save that which he wishes to forget."

By the murmurs of the crowd, and its attitude of hostility here and listlessness there, Birros gathered that he was doing badly. Evidently this was not the kind of thing the people expected from Dr. Ricoforax. And as he sought to change his tactics he saw several soldiers, gendarmes and officials enter the square from the east and begin to look closely at the crowd. What is more, he saw the learned Dr. Ricoforax elbowing his way to where two of the officials were in earnest conversation with the Flemish innkeeper.

"And here," shouted Birros, "is something which, when rubbed on the eyes, will make a man or woman invisible."

So saying, he rubbed his fingers over his eyelids, stepped from the box, wrenched the curtains aside, overturned the booth, jumped into the cart, whipped up the horse, and clattered out of the square by the western exit. The patient horse, more used to standing still while his learned master sold quack medicines to the credulous than to dashing madly along, yet did his best. But by ill-luck Birros soon found himself in that tangle of streets in the neighbourhood of the Hôtel-de-Ville, and unable to make much speed. Nevertheless he urged the nag onwards until he came to a stable-yard, which he judged to be the best place to

THE PURSUIT

abandon a horse which he could not feed. He called to a lad to look after the horse and cart for citizen Robespierre, saying they would be called for shortly. Then he continued his journey on foot, until he came to the rue Saint-Honoré. And as he turned into it two mounted gendarmes rode across the Marché des Innocents, pulled up at the corner of the rue Chausseterie, and looked up and down the street. Birros walked on again rapidly, still in a westerly direction, but with no objective in his mind. But he had an uncomfortable feeling that the pursuit was keeping up with him ; moreover, that the news of his escape had spread, and that it was not now merely a question of outpacing a few gendarmes or officials. His impression was that the hunt was now organized. When he came to the point where the rue de l'Arbre Sec joined the rue Saint-Honoré, he glanced to his left, towards the river, and saw mounted police passing the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois. They were coming in his direction. He looked to his right, and saw a small crowd following some soldiers along the rue des Deux Écus. It would not be long before he found himself surrounded, with all the streets blocked to him. He increased his pace.

Outside a gaunt house a carriage was standing, and as he drew level with it, an elderly gentleman came bobbing out of the courtyard and hopped into the carriage, shouting to the driver to proceed. Birros hopped in after him.

"What do you want?" said the man timidly. "You have a message for me?"

"Yes," said Birros, "but it is not to be delivered just yet. I am watched."

"Watched?" said the elderly man incredulously. "By whom?"

"Ah," said Birros with disgust, "by the usual ruffians."

His companion laughed. "My friend," he said, "when one is engaged in work such as yours, one must expect a certain amount of supervision, eh?"

THE GASCON

"I suppose so," said Birros sulkily.

"Now tell me, what is this precious message and where did Tallien pick you up?"

"I did the citizen Tallien a trifling service," said Birros.

By this time the carriage was moving on its way as rapidly as the press of people and other vehicles allowed. But by the time they got to the hall of the Jacobins, the man ordered the driver to stop. "Come with me," he said to Birros, "and tell me about it as we go."

Birros had just decided that the Jacobins would be a good hiding-place for him, especially as he seemed to be in the company of someone important enough to receive secret messages from Tallien. But as he got out of the carriage he saw a mounted policeman spur forward, and heard a shout. Luckily there was a throng outside the Jacobins. Birros pushed his way through it, and heard the horseman demanding, with oaths, a passage. Into an alley plunged Birros, and in and out of the maze of buildings where the old Convent of the Feuillants still stood; across the terrace and down through the gardens of the Tuileries. And now, behind him, there was a great commotion. He crossed a path which bordered the gardens, scaled a wall, slithered down on the quay, and doubled back eastwards. But there were more police ahead of him, drawn up at the entrance to a bridge. Without a moment's hesitation, tearing off his coat as he ran, he vaulted the embankment, floundered through the mud, and sprawled into the waters of the Seine. He struck out for the left bank, swimming strongly, and he was some way out into the stream before a man on the bridge upstream saw him and gave the alarm. All the police had to do was to cross the bridge and await him at the other side of the river. Instead of being trapped on dry land he was trapped in the water. He quickly changed his course and began to swim downstream, gradually coming in closer to the right bank. Ahead of him, as he swam, was the new bridge which was to be the crossing from the

THE PURSUIT

Place de la Révolution to the Palais Bourbon ; the successor of the Pont Louis XVI. And as he swam he saw, sticking out of the water, the stern of a small boat which had overturned. Even if it would not serve as a hiding-place, it would make a resting-place, and Birros was very tired. So for a few minutes he clung to the wreck. But in those few minutes he saw that the police were putting out in a boat from the opposite shore, and that the bridge behind him and the one ahead of him were lined with people who had gathered to watch the sport. The police boat had evidently not spotted him, for it was being rowed slowly upstream and away from him. He slipped back into the water and swam rapidly towards the left bank. By the time he was seen from the new bridge, and the shouting broke out, he was reasonably close to the left bank. He made for a dirty little inlet, where old hulks lay half embedded in the slime. Along the quay, from either side, people were running as he dragged himself up the oozing wall of the narrow channel, and flopped into a small yard that stank of refuse. A bald-headed workman, with a saw in his hand, awaited him at the entrance to a little shed.

"Which way did he go?" cried Birros.

"I haven't seen anybody."

"What? He came this way, swimming, and I nearly got him."

"I haven't seen anybody," said the man stolidly.

Birros narrowed his eyes.

"It is no light matter, citizen," he said, "to shelter an enemy of the people."

The man showed signs of uneasiness. "You may search my shed, citizen," he said, stepping aside from the doorway.

Shouting and the sound of running feet were drawing nearer.

"It seems that he went yonder," said the man, pointing in the direction of the clamour.

Birros glanced rapidly round the shed.

THE GASCON

"I think you are telling the truth," he said sternly. "Much depends on this capture. You shall show me a way out of this warren, and I will outpace the other pursuers. Come! Quick!"

The man led him round the shed, and through a dismal house where children lay asleep on a mouldy floor. He pointed down a passage.

"Follow straight along," he said, "and you will come to the Grenouillère Quay. Your man is probably making for the bridge."

Birros set off at a trot, and as he dashed across the quay, wild yelling broke out to his left, and a musket ball chipped the bricks at a corner of the street into which he turned. He drew into a doorway, and hastily tore his shirt into strips, and rubbed his matted hair with his dirty hands. Soldiers, police, men and women came pell-mell round the corner, and Birros, looking now more than ever like the scum of the wine-shops, fell in with the tag-end of the pursuit, breathing fire and slaughter with the best of them. As he had hoped would happen, this tag-end quickly tired of the game, and the two ugly villains by whose side Birros was marching suggested that it was time to drink. That suited the weary fugitive, until he realized that the last of his money had gone with his coat. However, it was not the moment to start an argument with his friends, who seemed to take it for granted that he knew the underworld as well as they did. One of them, the more talkative, had but one eye, and his vocabulary was not equal to his passion for expression. Its basis was some half-dozen of abominable oaths, repeated with every sentence, and uttered with mechanical vigour. The second man, a thin, scowling fellow, nodded approval of all that his comrade said, and occasionally swore an oath on his own. They went along the quays, and after a while dived down a silent cul-de-sac. Birros, who by now was imitating the shuffling gait and the husky voices, followed into what seemed to be a

THE PURSUIT

dump for stolen goods. There was a counter, piled up with lorgnettes and spoons and snuff-boxes and clocks, and behind the counter an enormous young woman with an expensive crucifix round her dingy neck. Against the wall was a bench, with two unsavoury women seated on it. At a sign from the talkative man the young woman poured something into three tin mugs and handed them to him. Birros drained his mug at a draught, and felt as though he had set his throat and stomach on fire. Then, before anybody could protest, he was out of the place and striding up the street. The two men came to the door and watched him go, cursing him at the top of their voices.

Birros wandered up and down streets, determined to end his connexion with the underworld, and wondering how he could procure himself some clothes and a meal. The afternoon was far advanced and he was growing more exhausted with every step, when he realized that he had come into a better-class quarter, and that his appearance would be highly suspicious. He turned quickly, intending to leave the respectable street in which he found himself, when he noticed through an open ground-floor window a pleasant-looking man with a pink-and-white face apparently engaged in bending over the inert body of a pallid young woman. He crossed the street and looked into the room, which was filled with inert figures. And Birros saw that they were wax-figures.

"May I come in for a moment?" he asked.

The man glanced up quickly, and then smiled.

"This way," he said, and Birros climbed over the sill of the window.

"I must excuse myself," said Birros, "but . . ."

"Now why does a gentleman like you go about in such a condition?" asked the man, still looking amused.

"I had my reasons," said Birros, "but that is all over now."

"And what can I do for you, sir?"

THE GASCON

" You are a maker of wax figures ? "

" As you see."

" But you have no sans-culotte."

" Why, that's true."

" Then permit me to give you these rags of mine. They will make the figure most realistic. And if I might, at the same time, borrow something less eccentric——"

The man now laughed openly. " What do you want to be — a Marquis ? "

" An ordinary respectable citizen when I leave here."

The modeller looked about him. Then he went to a cupboard and, without a word, produced a coat, breeches, a shirt, stockings, shoes — even a cravat.

" I observe that you ask no questions," said Birros.

" Only a fool asks questions in these times. You are welcome to these."

" I am deeply grateful. They shall be returned."

" I doubt it."

Birros reared back his head angrily. " Ventreguienne ! I am Armand Birros," he began.

" I did not ask your name," the man interrupted firmly, but still smiling.

Five minutes later, having discarded his rags and washed under a pump, and wearing his new clothes, Birros left the house of his benefactor, blowing a kiss to the wax-faced lady as he left. He had no idea of his whereabouts, so he walked down the street and swung out on to a quay, twirling his red moustache and trying to plan his next move. As was his custom when thinking, he had his eyes on the ground, and it was the sudden shout and the jingle of bit and bridle that made him look up. And there he was, a few yards from a bridge, with mounted police in front of him, and more of them already moving to surround him. He sprang at the nearest gendarme, unhorsed him, snatched at his pistol, but missed it, jumped on to the horse. But they were all about him before he could set the horse in

FÉLICIEN AND GABRIELLE

motion. It took six of them to unseat him, and then he fought them on the ground, and it was four minutes before they pinioned his arms and trussed him up.

"You see," said one of the policemen breathlessly, "we get you in the end, with all your cleverness."

Birros looked at him and laughed loudly.

"I wonder how you managed it," he said. "Why, you have no artillery. Not even a dozen squadrons of cavalry. Not a single regiment of foot. What a risk you were running! How did you know I might not have a cane? But guard me closely now, the whole crowd of you. I might decide to break loose, you know."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FÉLICIEN AND GABRIELLE

THE early spring days of 1793 had brought a warmer air to the hills of the Jura. A man and a woman stood by the open window of an inn near Morez. A light wind stirred the young leaves on the trees, and the two remained silent, a few paces apart, contemplating the scene before them as though they half hoped that Nature could heal their wounds. No sound but the rustling of the leaves disturbed their thoughts, and they made no movement, but their eyes were full of sorrow.

The French had retreated from the Low Countries, and Coburg's Austrians were moving forward to invest the French frontier fortresses. Custine had been driven back from the Rhine. The Prussians were threatening Mayence. A bayonet wound in the left arm, received in the defeat of Neerwinden, had incapacitated Félicien for some days, and he had returned to Paris. There he learned that

THE GASCON

Mme. de Mardecques and Gabrielle had set out for the Jura, with passports in a false name, intending to cross the Swiss frontier, and he used the time of his leave in following them. He and Gabrielle now stood looking through the window. Presently he turned towards her.

" Gabrielle——" he began.

But she raised her hand, with a smile, and said : " It is useless, Félicien. Let us not start the old argument again. Cannot we keep our convictions, and remain friends ? "

" You still cannot understand why I am what I am — a soldier of the Revolutionary armies."

" Less than ever now, Félicien. The Revolution has destroyed your home and your life. It has killed the King. It has killed my sister, whom you loved. My brother Michel is an exile, proscribed ; nobody knows where he is, or if he is even alive. My father is dead, killed fighting against Frenchmen. And here am I flying from my own country. Yet you will tell me to weigh all these things in the balance against an idea which has driven men mad. It is incomprehensible to me."

" Yet I cannot give up the hope of making you understand. It was no hasty decision I took. Nor have I ever attempted to justify the bestialities of the time. Too much has been attempted in too great a hurry, and worthless men have dishonoured the great principles in which I believe."

She moved impatiently, and faced him. " Félicien," she said, " why should you care to persuade me that you believe in what you are doing ? I know your honesty. I have no hard thoughts of you. I tell the simple truth when I say that I do not understand how your debate with yourself has brought you to this conclusion. Surely you see that our ways have parted." Then, turning her head away, and looking once more out of the window, she said in a lower tone : " I would have given much to follow your reasoning, and to agree with you, and to help you."

" Why ? " he asked.

FÉLICIEN AND GABRIELLE

She faced him again, and the sadness of her eyes made her face even more beautiful.

"I know your loneliness, Félicien. I know that when men of your nature love, it is no infatuation. I can understand intensity of feeling, though you think me lacking in imagination."

"Ah, loneliness," he said. "Yes, you have always understood and helped me, so long as we were not talking of politics or philosophy. And it is difficult for a man as young as I to live only for politics and philosophy, however inspired he may be by a great idea. I do not forget, Gabrielle, your constancy of affection. Loneliness eats into a man."

Then, like an elder sister, with that gravity of hers which was so far beyond her years, she laid a hand upon his sleeve.

"In time to come," she said, "you will grow accustomed to your loss. You will never forget her, but the affairs of the world and the business of living heal men who are stricken as you have been stricken."

He took her hand in his, and still she suspected nothing of what was in his mind. "I think," he said, "you misunderstand me even now — when we are not talking politics or philosophy." He smiled as he said this, and suddenly she grew perplexed and troubled.

"I loved Antoinette," he said, "as a boy loves. A very serious boy, who loves a gay vivacious girl. She was my first love."

She withdrew her hand from his. "You loved her as a man loves," she said. "Oh, I have watched you. Believe me, it will not help you now nor heal you later on to play a part to yourself, pretending that your love was less than it was."

She moved a pace away from him, and stood erect by the window. Outside the dusk was falling and the shadows were gathering in the room. Something had stirred like a wild bird in her heart, and she dared not show him her face. He remained silent, looking at her, and seeing her for the

THE GASCON

first time, and unable to speak the words he would have said to her, but happy beyond all expected happiness to stand in silence while the strong tide of his emotion swept over him.

"Gabrielle," he said.

She made no reply, but stood motionless, listening, waiting, unable to speak.

"Gabrielle," he said again.

He moved to her side and took both her hands in his. And then she turned to him, and he tried to find an answer in her face.

"Gabrielle," he said, "you, you are my love. It is for you I am lonely. Do not ask me when or how I knew this. Had I not been a blind fool I should have known it a long time past."

He saw the happiness of her smile.

"And you——?" he asked.

"Félicien," she said, "you will be lonely no more, my dearest one." And then the radiant youth faded from her face. "But I had forgotten," she said. "I have been out of time and space. Oh, Félicien, we must leave each other."

"For a moment," he said. "Only for a while, till the better times come."

Then she came to his arms, and in the darkening room they told each other all that was in their hearts.

The next morning, at an early hour, Mme. de Mardecques and Gabrielle set out on the last stage of their journey, and Félicien rode beside them. But to Mme. de Mardecques it seemed that, in place of the sombre couple she knew so well, she had with her a boy and girl. "It is what I would have wished for you two," she said, "but I am sorry Félicien ever got mixed up in politics."

"That subject is never to be mentioned, Aunt," said Gabrielle.

They climbed slowly into the mountains and, when the frontier was crossed at Les Rousses, the farewells were

BIRROS IN PRISON

said. Then the carriage went on alone, down the mountain-side into Switzerland. Félicien stood up in his stirrups, waving his hat, and Gabrielle leaned from the carriage window until she could see him no more. Then he turned and rode slowly back the way he had come, marvelling at the beauty of the woods and the clear sky, and singing to himself a song he had not sung since his schooldays.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BIRROS IN PRISON

As soon as Birros found himself in his cell, he said to himself, "I will now do what all the people in romances do when they find themselves in prison. Perhaps it is as easy to escape as they tell us in their books." Whereupon he thumped upon the wall, but it did not ring hollow; he tried the door, but, as he guessed, they had not forgotten to lock it; he made a leap, drew himself up by a bar of the small window, and looked out — and there was no moat full of water below for him to jump into; nor did the bar break when he exerted his great strength. There was no flagstone in the floor to be prized up so as to allow him to drop into the sewers of Paris and swim to safety. It is true that there was a wooden chair with which to stun the jailer, but it was such a worm-eaten and feeble old chair that it would have broken like matchwood on any normal head. There remained only the sweetheart disguised as an official to bring an order for his release, signed and sealed. He had certainly had enough sweethearts to rush the prison by force, dressed up as the Council of the Commune, but he had never taken love seriously enough to justify the expectation of such devotion. "Only one

THE GASCON

thing is certain," said Birros. "I am not going to sit here waiting until they choose the moment to do me to death. I know their methods. I must get out of this as quickly as possible." Then he sat down on the pallet of straw to think things out. Presently he rose and walked up and down the small cell. The light was failing — such light as filtered into that dismal place. He could hear voices in altercation, and the growling of a dog. Horrible smells filled the stale air. There was a sound outside the door, a little trap was opened half-way up, and a platter of meat and bread and a bowl of water were pushed through. Birros was standing in his characteristic attitude, shoulders squared, head held high, with the chin tilted upwards, hands on hips, with the fingers spread wide, and legs apart. He saw the jailer hesitate as though he expected an attack. With a laugh Birros snatched the bowl and platter. "Bring me a candle," he said.

"What do you want a candle for?" asked the man in a surly voice.

"To burn the prison down, of course," said Birros pleasantly.

The man swore, shut the trap, and went away. He did not return. Birros lay down on his bed and was soon asleep, and dreaming that he was back again in his own valley. He awoke several times during the night. Once the dog was howling, until it was heavily beaten into silence. Once he heard the screaming of a terrified man, and a clattering and banging in a corridor. The smells seemed to become more nauseating every time he awoke, and the cell to grow more stuffy. "This is no life for me," he said as he ate the soup and bread they brought him for breakfast. "But how can a man fight his way out of a place like this?" Soon after he had finished eating, the man who waited on him, his Gentleman of the Cell as he called him, came back again, and this time opened the door. Birros experienced a moment of terror. He knew

BIRROS IN PRISON

that at any minute anybody might be taken before the Tribunal, and that if this were his summons he would be dead by evening. And never was a man who loved life so much. So enraged was he that this miserable lout could cause him to lose his manhood for a moment, that he contemplated breaking his skull against the wall. Indeed he looked so fierce that the man kept his distance and said hurriedly, "It is the hour of exercise. Follow me." Birros followed him along a damp and dingy corridor. It was lit at intervals by lanterns fixed in stone brackets against the slimy walls. But the smell of mould and decay was conquered by the more hideous smells which seemed to be the diseased breath of the prison itself. There were other prisoners going along the corridor, and what struck Birros about them was their unhealthy pallor. Some were very thin, and walked with difficulty. One man, obviously a newcomer, sang to himself as he went along, and looked about him with interest.

The prisoners went down worn steps and across a wide space where four corridors met. The floor was uneven and little pools of water had collected in holes and crannies where the stone was broken. They went on, and up more steps, and along a lighted corridor, where there was a little gate to pass through. Beside this gate, outside a small office, stood an official, looking the prisoners up and down as they passed through.

Birros, becoming in his turn the subject of a scrutiny, returned it. He stopped, faced the *guichetier*, and looked him slowly up and down.

"Nom de Dieu, what farce is this?" shouted the man.

"Ventreguienne!" replied the prisoner, "I know of no law that forbids a prisoner to scrutinize his jailer. I may not have many rights in this garden of dreams, but one of them is to look at you, my friend. Not that it pleases me much. You are evidently a distillation of bile rather than a man. Lead on, rancid guts." This last injunction was to his jailer.

THE GASCON

The *guichetier* became red in the face and kicked out at Birros as he passed, but Birros caught his leg and pushed him over, and the prisoners howled with laughter. Even the jailer grinned, for Demichoule was an unpopular drunkard who held his position by spying and tale-bearing.

Birros found himself in a small cobbled yard, bounded on all sides by the barred windows of the prison. The court was unswept and filthy. Against one of the walls, under the ground-floor cell windows, were low wooden benches, and the sick and elderly were seated upon these, gazing disconsolately in front of them. There was a kind of kennel or gutter running across the centre of the court, and a boy with a spade and a pail was slowly cleaning it. Birros walked round the yard and found that in a far corner there was another little gate, and behind it a very narrow passage which led to another court. He heard women's voices and caught a glimpse of a woman's figure at the far end of the passage. He realized that the passage led to the court where the women were exercised. There was nothing else of interest to engage his attention, so he strolled up and down the yard, thinking with intense concentration. He could not see any way out of this prison except by trickery. And where and how was the trickery to begin? With characteristic carelessness he had already made an enemy.

When the hour of exercise was over and he was back in his cell, he was no nearer to any plan than before. "This," said he to himself, "is surely the moment for some beauty to disguise herself as Fouquier-Tinville, to summon me for an interrogation, and then whisk me out of this."

That night he slept but little. The heat was stifling, the smells were overpowering. The dog barked and bayed and whined. He tossed on his straw mattress, his thoughts circling aimlessly. By morning he had got as far as stating the problem of escape in the simplest terms. It could only be resolved by a co-operation of outside agencies with

BIRROS IN PRISON

himself. Bribery of the prison officials was out of the question. Besides, he was sure that they would take any money offered and then betray him to get promotion, or more money. But he knew that there were certain tradesmen connected with the life of the prisons. There must be a laundress. There were wine-sellers who supplied the concierge and his underlings, and any prisoners who could pay. There were odd-job men always about the premises — builders, locksmiths. But to establish relations with any of them needed money and time. Birros had no money, and probably little enough time.

After his breakfast he was sitting on his chair, thinking of nothing in particular, when his cell door was opened and a tall, fair-haired man with burning dark eyes came in. He was followed by a tubby little man with grey hair who took up a position against the closed door. The fair-haired man stared hard at Birros, who recognized him instantly as Chassaviel. He wore a tricorne hat with a red, white and blue cockade, and a broad sash. He was armed with a heavy sword and pistols. Power and authority had made him only more of a fanatic, as his eyes showed. He spoke sharply in the raucous voice which Birros had not forgotten.

“ Perhaps you remember me, citizen Birros ? ”

“ I meet so many people. You must excuse me,” said Birros.

“ My name is Chassaviel.”

“ Indeed ? Chassaviel. . . . Oh, yes. But my Chassaviel had no scar on the side of his head. You’ve changed greatly.”

“ You think so ? ”

“ Yes. You look as though you were afraid of something.”

Birros took a step forward. The man behind Chassaviel did the same, ranging himself by the side of the official.

“ Now you look better,” said Birros. “ With that fellow at your back — oh, I assure you I know all about him.”

THE GASCON

The grey-haired man made a menacing movement and cursed loudly.

"Silence!" said Chassaviel. "Citizen Birros, I did not come here to act in a pantomime. I am visiting the prison in the course of my duty. You might like to know that your detention will be a very brief one. I have seen citizen Fouquier. You also will see him the day after to-morrow."

"Alas!" said Birros. "I'm afraid not."

Chassaviel had turned to go and was on the threshold, while his man held the door open. He now came back into the cell.

"Explain that jest," he said.

"I shall not be here when they come for me."

Chassaviel smiled. "Use any means you please," he said, "to keep your courage up. Even silly thoughts like that are, I suppose, a comfort to one in your position."

"A great comfort, I assure you," said Birros. Then, raising his voice, "Have you no sense, little one? Do you think a man of my stamp sits quietly awaiting your pleasure, and the filthy Fouquier's? Thunder of God! I have far too much respect for myself to allow anybody like you or your master to play the fool with me. What kind of a clown do you take me for, if you think I shall remain longer than suits my convenience in this rat-run?"

He came closer to Chassaviel, and the attendant put his hand on his pistol-butt, and the jailer came running down the passage at the sound of that loud voice.

Birros, laughing, thrust forward his face. "I give you fair warning, citizen Chassamiel, or whatever you call yourself, I'm clearing out. Now, you may go."

Livid with rage, Chassaviel said to the jailer, "Redouble the guards. Don't let this man out of your sight for a second."

Then he turned, went out and stalked down the corridor, the scabbard of his heavy sword scraping the stone floor, and the laughter of Birros following him.

BIRROS IN PRISON

Birros, much relieved by his outburst, was still smiling happily when the jailer came to take him to the exercise yard. Outside the door, when it opened, was a second jailer, a glowering thick-set fellow with a bullet head, blubber lips and cloudy eyes. He was seated on a little stool, picking his teeth. Once in the yard, Birros was free to walk round and round or to and fro. The jailers gathered in a corner to talk. Something drew Birros towards the far wall, where was the little gate and the narrow passage which he had noticed before. He was so certain that his only hope was somehow connected with that passage that he became very wary. He discarded his good-natured smile, and became gloomy and dispirited. He walked aimlessly hither and thither, with his eyes on the ground, kicking pebbles, and appearing to notice nothing. But his goal was that gate, and he could hear the gatekeeper and his mate laughing and talking in their little office. As he drew nearer, still apparently walking at random, he heard a woman's voice. She was parodying the kind of love-song she thought was sung in aristocratic drawing-rooms. She sang in the villainous accent of the women of the Halles, and in a coarse husky voice, as though she were half drunk :

“ Tendre fruit des pleurs de l'Aurore,
Zim-zim — oho — la jolie fleur zim-zim. . . .
Hélas ! Hélas ! la pauvre fleur . . . ”

Roars of laughter greeted the performance, and Birros, coming in view, saw her standing in what she imagined was an aristocratic pose, with a wine-basket on her arm. She was a plump woman, with untidy brown hair that half hid her face, for it straggled in all directions under her dirty lace bonnet. She was facing the little gate, and the two men were watching her from inside their room. As Birros appeared she winked at him twice, and then dropped her basket. With an oath she stooped down and,

THE GASCON

in doing so, managed to throw something towards Birros. It rolled under the lowest bar of the gate and he picked up a small stone with a piece of paper tied round it. To explain his stoop to anyone who might be looking, he picked up another stone, which he tossed up and down idly in his hand as he turned away, and walked back towards the other side of the yard. As he went he flipped his pebble high into the air, and let it fall. The more important one was now in his pocket.

After exercise was over he was marched back to his cell, wondering what connexion there was between the fat woman from the wine-shop and some friend of his outside. He was eager to read the note that had been tossed to him, and was enraged when, arriving at his cell, he was greeted by the second jailer who followed him in.

"I'm to bear you company," said the man. "My name is Trouaille. Do you play piquet?"

"I am not in the mood for piquet," said Birros.

"Then it is going to be very dull here. I hope my next client will be more agreeable. The Tribunal is getting rid of you people pretty quickly, now, isn't it?"

He went on chattering, while Birros tried to think of some way of inducing him to go away, so that he could read the note. He had established himself on the chair, and remained there, uttering his uninteresting thoughts, and paring his long dirty nails with a knife, until the midday meal arrived. Then he rose to go.

"I must leave you for a while," he said. "My dinner-time. Niard will relieve me. Perhaps, when I return, you will be in a better mood, and we can play piquet."

The moment the door closed on him Birros had the pebble out of his pocket and was reading the note. He had barely finished it and thrust it away when Niard came in. The note said :

To-morrow the wine-woman returns with something special for the gatekeeper and his mate. A kind doctor has fortified

BIRROS IN PRISON

their wine for the good of their health. Contrive to come to the little gate again when you hear a loud laugh during the exercise hour. Try to trick your jailers. Otherwise use force, if they accompany you across the yard. Leave the rest to fat Margot from the wine-shop.

When he had finished reading, he could only assume that someone whose writing he had never seen, was behind the plan, whatever it was. But when Niard came in, Birros showed no sign of excitement. The newcomer was a decent, silent man, who exchanged a word or two with the prisoner, and then minded his own business. After half an hour Trouaille returned, smelling of brandy, and Niard was relieved.

"Now," said Trouaille, "what about that game of piquet?"

"You seem to be very anxious to play," said Birros. "Why?"

"Why does a man like me play cards? To win money. Citizen, I do not like the idea of so many of you people going to the guillotine with their money out of reach. After all, where you are going you will not need money."

"You are a fool, Trouaille," said Birros, "if you think that we carry our money about with us nowadays. If we did, we'd be robbed within the first hour of our imprisonment. You are not ambitious enough. You could win only a few coins from me."

"I suppose you are like the other cunning swine, who bury their gold and their treasures on their estates before they are arrested."

"I have no estate," said Birros, and paused.

Suddenly he saw how this aimless conversation might be turned to his purpose. He decided to go to work warily.

"You are not such a fool as I thought, Trouaille," and he smiled, as at a sudden thought.

"Indeed? And what may you mean by that?"

Birros allowed his brow to cloud and clenched his fist.

THE GASCON

He spoke with a heavy sneer. "I was thinking," he said, "of a certain wealthy gentleman to whom, very largely, I owe my present situation." He gave a violent laugh. "They caught him. Oh, he was very wealthy, but if you had played piquet with him, you would never have guessed it. Nor if you had gone to his home. He was so sure of coming through safely that he had all his valuables transferred by night to a safe place. It wasn't as safe as he thought."

Trouaille was evidently interested. He had been sprawling on the mattress. Now he sat up; and he was staring at Birros, who appeared to have no interest in the effect of his story on the man, but had risen from the chair, and was pacing to and fro.

"Go on," said Trouaille. "Somebody found the stuff?"

"Yes," said Birros. "Somebody found it and kept it. An official. A man named Cham — Chassin — Chassapi — Chassa——"

"Chassaviel," shouted Trouaille, jumping to his feet.

"Yes, that was the name. I was reminded of the story by the visit he paid me yesterday."

There was a long silence, and then Trouaille laughed.

"I see the game," he said. "You tell me all this so frankly and openly. It is the old prison trick. In return I am to help you to escape."

Birros turned quickly, with a surprised look. "Escape?" he said. "Now why on earth should I want to escape? I've no father or mother, no sisters, no brothers, no wife. My friend, I am too sick of my life to wish to prolong it."

Trouaille laughed again, incredulously.

"Yet," he said, "it is common talk in the prison that you announced to citizen Chassaviel that you were about to escape."

Birros drew himself up with mournful dignity.

"When a man of pride, such as I," he said, "finds himself in the power of another man, he does not let it be seen that there is no fight left in him. His only weapon is

BIRROS IN PRISON

his pride. Had I told a tale of buried treasure, and offered you the information necessary to lay hands on it, in return for my liberty, well might you suspect me. *That* is the old prison trick, citizen Trouaille. At this moment I wouldn't accept my freedom as a gift. How much less would I enter into a perilous intrigue with a man who could inform on me when he pleased. Further, I have one day more to live. What kind of scheme for escape could you — one against so many — contrive between now and to-morrow? No. If you think I am asking your help to escape, forget the whole story. I would sooner be tortured to death in this cell, now, this very moment."

Now that last sentence was the kind of revolutionary eloquence Trouaille could appreciate. He felt he had done an injustice to the prisoner.

"We'll say no more about it," he said. "Let us play piquet."

Birros had laid his trap. Apparently he had failed. What he had been hoping for was not an offer of help in the matter of an escape, but an offer to render some small service in return for the information about Chassaviel. He continued to ape resignation and dejection. To make certain of carrying out the scheme of fat Margot's employers on the next day, it seemed essential to have at least one jailer friendly to him. But there was no friendliness in the bloated face above the greasy cards on the mattress. They played for a while in silence. Several times Trouaille cleared his throat, shifted his position on the mattress, looked at Birros, and appeared to be about to speak. He received no encouragement, though the prisoner was watching him closely without seeming to. Trouaille hummed tunelessly. "This," said Birros to himself, "is like sitting by the Briouzou waiting for a fish to bite. Ah! Here comes the fish. Gently, little monster!" For at that moment, and all in a rush, Trouaille opened his mouth, and snapped at the hook.

THE GASCON

"Of course," he said, "that is not to say that if you wanted a message carried to somebody, or to see somebody before they take you, I would not be the man to put the affair in hand. You say you have no parents or relations. Perhaps, now, there is a lady?"

Birros allowed him to see the sudden start of hope which jerked his body, and the eager look in his eyes. Then he relapsed into lassitude, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I risk getting you into trouble, my friend? What could you do?" That stung the fellow's vanity, as it was meant to do.

"And who would make trouble for me, Trouaille?" he cried. "Let them try. That concierge . . ."

Again Birros allowed hope to come into his eyes.

"Aha! What did I tell you?" said Trouaille. "Then there *is* a lady."

"There is a lady. Yes. But — but you do not quite understand."

"And what do I not understand?"

"She is in this prison?"

"And you want to bid her farewell?"

"I would not ask that. All I wish is to see her, to lay my eyes on her once more from a distance."

"You know where the women exercise, at the same hour as the men?"

"No. How should I?"

"Their yard is joined to yours by a narrow passage with a little gate."

"Wait! I have seen that passage as I walked round the yard."

"To-morrow I will take you along that passage to where you can see her."

Too late Birros saw the trap he had walked into. If he said, "No, merely engage the jailers in talk while I go to take a look at the lady," Trouaille would reply: "Yes, and see you walk right into the arms of the gatekeeper and

BIRROS IN PRISON

his man." If he fell in with Trouaille's scheme, he would be getting him mixed up in fat Margot's plan, and perhaps wrecking it. But it was too late to retreat.

"It would be an act for which I can never repay you," said Birros.

"That is true enough," replied Trouaille. "You haven't the time. But somebody else will repay me, perhaps, eh? The virtuous citizen Chassaviel, possibly, eh? By the way, what is the lady's name? She may have been grabbed by Fouquier already, you know."

"I must take my chance of that."

"But what is her name? I can let you know whether she is still here."

Birros grinned. "And afterwards accuse her of plotting with me? Oh, no, my friend."

"Very good," said Trouaille angrily, "you don't trust me, and I don't trust you. It is better so. It will enable me to see that you play no tricks."

Birros allowed him to win the game. Presently Niard returned to duty, and announced that he was to spend the night in the cell, and had brought a mattress with him. Trouaille would relieve him in the morning. Birros slept little. He was imagining what would occur to-morrow during the hour of exercise. He tried to foresee every possibility in the minutest detail, in order that he might be ready to act accordingly. Towards dawn he was convinced that nothing could surprise him, and find him unprepared. He had noticed with amusement that Niard started up, gripping a pistol, every time he moved on his mattress. Chassaviel had certainly taken to heart his boast that Fouquier would never get him. He began to feel confident of good fortune in his attempt, until a thought occurred to him: "Suppose I am taken before Fouquier in the morning instead of the evening." "In that case," said he to himself, "I will kill a few of these vermin and die fighting, or possibly fight my way out."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BIRROS ESCAPES, AND CHÉLIDOINE BECOMES A WIDOW

HARDLY had Birros opened his eyes on what might well be the last day of his life when he took his natural gaiety in hand. The prospect of action always made him uncontrollably happy, but it was now a question not of controlling his happiness, but of something even more difficult. He had to act the part of a man who has despaired, a man in whom even the will to hope is dead. Only one thing on earth now had power to influence him, the last glimpse of one whom he loved. Niard was already astir, and after breakfast Trouaille relieved him.

"This would be the day of your escape," said Trouaille, "if you wanted to escape."

He said "if you wanted to escape" in the tone of one who says "How stupid of you not to put your cards on the table and trust me. I could get you out of this."

"I have told you," said Birros, "that I am not interested in escaping, but only in seeing a certain person for the last time."

"As you please," said Trouaille.

Birros said to himself: "This man is convinced that I am going to make a dash for it, and has laid his plans accordingly. If I said I would like him to help me to escape, he'd betray me, and he doesn't believe a word I'm saying now. This is going to be an interesting day. He thinks he's got me either way, whether I confide fully in him or not."

They played piquet and Trouaille won again. He regarded Birros with a knowing smile, as though he said, "I know what's going on in that brain of yours. We're playing a more interesting game than piquet, and I'm the

BIRROS ESCAPES

certain winner." Birros remained gloomy and silent. When the time came for the hour of exercise, Trouaille said, as he opened the door, "The hour of Escape." Then he fell in on the right of the prisoner and a man named Cudroc on the left. When they came to the yard, Trouaille had a word or two with Cudroc, who nodded, and then joined his comrades in a corner. But Birros noticed that he stared hard at him, and did not take his eyes from him while he joined in the conversation of his fellow jailers. The chief concern of Birros now was to delay his approach to the passage until he heard the loud laugh. It was no good going to the appointed place before the fat wine-woman had arrived. Trouaille helped him out of this difficulty.

"Don't be impatient," he said. "Give the ladies time to get into their yard."

"I may miss her," said Birros, knowing that the more impatient he appeared to be, the more would Trouaille delight to restrain him, out of sheer malice. He therefore pretended to resent being kept back, and Trouaille, to play with him, went forward very slowly towards the little gate. When they were some twenty paces from it, Birros stopped, and with a self-conscious smile began to fidget with his dress. Trouaille loosened the pistols in his belt, and looked back across the yard. Birros looked back too, and saw Cudroc and two or three others strolling slowly in their direction. Seeing him look back, Trouaille smiled. Birros smiled back at him in a puzzled way. Trouaille grunted with laughter.

Then someone else laughed.

When he heard the high, vulgar laugh of the wine-woman, Birros had a clear vision of the two men in the little office sagging in a drugged stupor, and of fat Margot awaiting him.

"Come," said Trouaille, "you shall buy me wine for the favour I am doing you."

THE GASCON

"I could do with some myself," said Birros.

They went forward and pushed through the gate. The blowsy Margot was standing with arms akimbo outside the door of the office. Her basket was beside her on the ground.

"Wine, my good woman," said Birros, and she picked up the basket.

"My friends shall join us," said Trouaille, going to the door of the office.

"Hé, Martin! Flocques! What the de——!"

The thick bottle caught him at the base of the skull and he pitched forward into the room, and crashed on his face.

"Quick!" whispered the woman. "Follow me!"

"Quick, indeed!" said Birros. "Three or four of them followed me across the yard."

"Take this!" She produced a loaded pistol from under her skirt.

They ran along the passage, and into another office at the far end. A man was lying in a chair, breathing heavily, and very pale in the face. Margot locked the door and made for another at the far side of the room. By now they could hear shouting in the passage. The woman locked the second door on the outside, and they sped along a wider passage and out into a very small deserted court. As they made for a low door in the wall, it opened, and two prison officials came through. The fugitives were almost on top of them before they could shut the door and stand with their backs to it. Birros shot one of them in the chest. The second closed with him, and they rolled over. Fat Margot waited for the official to come uppermost, then she aimed a blow with a bottle at the back of his head. It was not as strong or as well-directed a blow as the one upon which it was modelled. But it did its work. The man grunted and clapped both hands to his head, and the next moment Birros smote him in the face with his pistol-butt. Once through the door they followed a covered way, and

BIRROS ESCAPES

at length came to a main gate. A crowd of people were gathered round it, all talking excitedly.

"He's drunk."

"He's dead."

"Bah ! He's fainted !"

"Give him air."

Nobody took much notice of the two new arrivals, who elbowed their way through the press, catching sight, as they passed the porter's office, of a figure slouched in a chair. The next moment they were hurrying along a narrow street with steep houses on each side. Birros asked no questions and was given no information, marvelling only at the courage and self-confidence of his companion. They walked for some time in silence, and finally came to a neat little road, with seats beneath lime trees. Half-way down this they went under an archway into an alley, where was tethered a big bay horse. The woman led him by a back door into what seemed to be a deserted tavern. She preceded him up a dark and creaking stairway and opened a door into a small room in which was a table spread with food and wine, and two chairs set ready. He turned to Margot.

"Now, my good woman," he said, "let us end this mystery. You have saved my life — you and your master or mistress between you. Where are they, and what is to be done with me ?"

"I will fetch my mistress, sir," said Margot, going through a door that led into an inner room.

Birros was twirling his moustaches and looking out of the window when he heard a voice say : "Ventreguienne ! He did not know me !" The voice was the deep, musical voice of Chélidoine, and she now came into the room, flushed and joyous, and carrying in her hand a brown wig, a lace cap, a dingy dress, and a quantity of horsehair stuffing. Birros stared in amazement.

"Then it was you !" he cried. "By St. Maragou,

THE GASCON

what a woman ! What an actress ! ”

“ You once gave me a false beard,” she said. “ Here, in return, is a false stomach.”

And she handed him the horsehair. He dropped it, and opened his arms.

“ My admirable, my excellent ring-dove ! ” he roared.

“ My clumsy Monsieur Camus,” said she.

Whereupon they fell to kissing.

“ Tell me,” said he, “ how it was managed.”

“ A maid that I had,” said she, “ two years ago, married a man who owned a wine-shop that supplied the prison. He provided the wine. A doctor I know drugged it. And I delivered it. That is all.”

“ But how did you know where I was ? ”

“ You forget, thick-headed one, that my husband has a list of those to appear before Fouquier. ‘ My dear,’ says he to me, ‘ they caught the rascal that caused us all that disturbance on the night your brother arrived. Armand Birros is his name. Fouquier is seeing him in three days’ time.’ ‘ How droll, my dear husband,’ says I, with a yawn. ‘ And where did they put this Armand What’s-his-name ? ’ Well, as soon as I knew where you were, I set to work.”

“ But if I had not come to the little passage during exercise yesterday ? ”

“ I should have shouted something to stir your memory — one of your oaths perhaps.”

“ And supposing they follow us here ? The people here may betray you.”

“ It is very likely,” said she, “ that they have already done so. One must trust nobody to-day. That is why, when you have eaten and drunk, you are to mount that horse and ride out of Paris until this trouble blows over.”

“ Leaving you, of course, to face the danger.”

“ Of course. I am the wife of an important official of the Tribunal. Such people are not easily crossed to-day. What proof has anybody that I helped you ? They will

BIRROS ESCAPES

go to the wine-shop to ask for fat Margot. But nobody there will ever have seen her or heard of her."

"I would not thus leave a man who had done me such a service as you have done me. And you think I will leave a woman?"

"Sweet Snubnose, would you have me go a-gypsying with you, with half France at our heels and a price on our heads? To be seen with you would damn me. I am in no danger. It is you that are in danger. Eat and drink quickly, and be gone."

She poured him out a glass of wine, and one for herself.

"To our next meeting, my wood-pigeon," said he. "It is time for me to follow the wars."

"To our next meeting, then," said she.

And the stairs outside the room creaked.

They both started. Then Chélidoine picked up the clothes of her disguise and quietly carried them into the next room. She came back and sat down. There was a timid knock on the door. Birros strode across the room and flung it open, and a little lad with bare feet and legs and a ragged shirt, glancing hastily behind him, came quickly into the room.

"What is it, Augustin?" said Chélidoine.

"Madame," said the lad, in a frightened voice, "Monsieur Angelot is signalling at the end of the street. The authorities must be coming."

"They are on the trail quickly," said Birros, cramming half a pie into his mouth.

"Good boy," said Chélidoine, putting her arm round the little fellow's shoulders. "Now run quickly, and burn these things below. Not a scrap must remain. And here is money for you, boy."

When he had left the room Birros took Chélidoine's hands in his own and drew her to him.

"Our meetings, my love," he said, "are brief and turbulent."

THE GASCON

"And one or other of us is always disguised."

"Do you love me better than your husband?"

"Oh, modest demand! But go at once! We shall meet again."

"Where and when?"

"Who knows? If you run your head into more trouble, I suppose I shall have to get you out of it. If you want any more rope or false noses send word to me here."

"You are the most entrancing lady I ever met."

"That is as I would wish, Camus."

There was a final prolonged embrace, and then Birros broke away, ran down the stairs and out into the alley, mounted the horse, and rode out under the archway and rapidly away from the tavern. Chélidoine stood for a moment where he had left her, in the middle of the room. Then she too went down the creaking stairs, left the tavern, and walked across Paris to her home. A quarter of an hour later a crowd came running, with soldiers and officials at its head, and stopped at the beginning of the little road with the lime trees. The man with the sash and the sword who appeared to be in command was in a fury, and was gripping an excited youngster by the shoulder.

"I tell you, citizen," said the youngster, "they came this way. A great broad man with red hair, and a fat woman."

"Then they cannot be far away," said the leader. "We will search all the houses in the neighbourhood."

"Burn them out!" yelled a woman's voice.

"Your pardon, citizen," said a respectable elderly man who had been standing at the corner of the street, and now approached the group, "your pardon. But I saw the two people you are seeking. I have but recently come from the horse-market over the river. I saw these two in the rue Gros Caillou. I took note of them because they were such an ill-assorted pair, and seemed to fear pursuit. . . ."

"Go on, go on," shouted the official; "where did they go?"

BIRROS ESCAPES

"Your pardon, citizen, they were greatly agitated, and told the driver to leave Paris by the nearest gate."

Whereupon the whole crowd went off at a great pace across the river, while M. Angelot smiled to think of Birros galloping hard in the opposite direction.

Madame Rozérieulles was awaiting her husband when he returned home from the Palais de Justice that evening. The maid had laid a meal. The windows were open to the noises of the street, and the lady was seated with embroidery upon her lap, listening for some chance crier of news, and thinking of Armand Birros, as she had thought of no man in her twenty-three years of life. When Anatole Rozérieulles came in, she noticed at once that he was more nervous and fussy than usual. He was also in a singularly bad temper. But she was used to his ways by now, after a year of marriage. He said nothing, but he seemed to be trying to avoid her eyes. He ate, without relish or comment, what was set before him, and drank his usual half-glass of red wine. Towards the end of this characteristically gloomy supper-party, Chélideine decided to start the ball rolling.

"You have had an irritating day, Anatole?"

"Most irritating."

His sharp eyes grew less restless as he looked at her. "Do you remember," he continued, "that man who escaped from a house in this street? It was on the night when your brother happened to arrive. By the way, how is your brother? You have not spoken of him at all."

"I have had no word of him since he went to Meaux."

"Well, as you know, we caught the other man, the one who escaped, Armand Birros. But he escaped again, from the prison. Fouquier is enraged, and there are queer stories. Your friend Angelot seems to have been mixed up in the escape, and it appears that a fat woman with brown hair is being searched for, too. It's very awkward for me. Most

THE GASCON

awkward. As the wife of a prominent official, you should choose your friends more carefully."

"And why," asked Chélidoine, "should Angelot risk his neck for a man he has never seen?"

"I have no idea," said her husband. "Have you?"

"Naturally not."

"Well, it is infuriating for me to be told that this man Birros was arrested in this street, within a stone's-throw of our house, and that your friend Angelot is interested enough to help him. Can't you imagine what follows? Sly hints about my young wife. Dirty jests."

"Which my husband no doubt knows how to deal with."

"I prefer your good name to be above reproach."

"And you do not consider it above reproach. I would prefer you to come to the point, Anatole, and say what is in your mind. If this is merely one of your old storms of jealousy, out with it, and get it over. Am I supposed to be the mistress of Angelot, or of the other man, whatever his name was?"

Rozérieulles had turned pale, and his eyes and mouth were hard. But Chélidoine had complete command of herself and was smiling.

"You are indiscreet," said Rozérieulles. "That is all I know — at present. I do not intend to allow you to ruin my career."

She got up from her chair and went and stood by the window. As she moved she was conscious that something had fallen to the floor, but could not see what it was. Her husband took up a candle, and in its light they both saw a portion of brown wig lying on the ground; a few long meshes that must have caught in her clothing when she changed her dress at the tavern.

He picked up the hair and sprang erect.

"What is this?" he shouted.

"The wig I wore for the rescue," she said, with a laugh. He did not know whether to take her seriously or not.

BIRROS ESCAPES

"This is no matter for jesting," he said.

"I disagree. It is the only way to deal with such matters."

"Are you trying to tell me that it was you who — who hired the woman to — what is your interest in this man Birros?"

"You still suspect me?"

"Unless you can explain this wig, and your brother. I don't believe you have a brother. He was more like a lover. I think that you and Angelot and Birros and the woman are all in the conspiracy together." His voice rose. He was trembling with anger and malice. "I see now. The fat woman was the man you call your brother. The wig was for him. Deny it! Deny it, infamous woman!"

Before she could speak, he went on. "Do not trouble to deny it. I go at once to Fouquier to denounce you and your friends."

He strode to the door and took the key. "I shall lock you in. I am a man who has the revolutionary courage to denounce his own wife. Babette!"

The maid came in timidly.

"You are under arrest, Babette. You and your mistress. You will remain here until I return."

"The girl has nothing to do with this," said Chéridoine. "You lunatic!"

He was at the door now. He seized his hat and went out, locking the door after him. They heard his footsteps on the stairs, and his loud call for the concierge to take his orders. Then they heard a mad, strained voice shout: "At last, citizen Rozérieulles! Die, wild beast!" There was a shot, a scream, another shot; the sound of a struggle, a cry of "Back, you fool, or I will kill you, too!" — two more shots, and then running feet; a moment's silence, and the opening of a door below, cries, and silence again.

It was all over so quickly that the two women could not believe it had happened.

The maid Babette was weeping in a corner, cowering as

THE GASCON

though she expected the sound of more shots, and ready to thrust her fingers in her ears. A murmur of voices came up from below, as a crowd gathered. Idlers from the street shouted advice. A youngster was bidden summon a doctor. There was an altercation, which was evidently cut short by somebody in authority. Chélidoine leaned against the door, listening. Mme. Cornubin, the theatrical costumier, was in hysterics, but a woman's voice was calming her. Then another voice shouted, "The doctor! Way for the doctor!" and the murmuring died down to a whispering, while Chélidoine could picture the bloody bodies, and the doctor bending over them. After a minute or two the noise broke out afresh, and she heard somebody say, "Yes, she is above, on the first floor." And she caught fragments of talk. "His wife . . . poor soul. . . . Ah, it is terrible, terrible. . . . They say she is only a girl. . . ." And thus Chélidoine learned that her husband lay dead below, even before the official beat on the door. "Have the goodness to open, please, citizeness," he said.

"I am locked in," she said.

"Well, have the goodness to unlock the door, please, citizeness."

"You do not understand. I am locked in. The door is locked on the outside."

"But there is no key here, citizeness."

"It is — below."

"Ah. I understand. The murderer locked you in first. He has the key, then? But he has fled."

Babette plucked at her sleeve, and drew her across the room.

"But citizen Rozérieulles took the key with him, Madame," she said.

Chélidoine put her finger to her lips. "They must not know we quarrelled, girl," she said.

"We must break in the door," said the official.

But someone else had come up the stairs. A supercilious

BIRROS ESCAPES

voice said, "It will not be necessary. The doctor has found the key. Here it is."

"Then the murderer is caught?" said the official.

"Not yet. No more talk. Open."

The key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and there entered a tall man with the bearing of a stage emperor. One would have sworn he had stepped on to the stage when he entered the room, and was awaiting the customary applause before delivering his opening lines.

"Madame," he said, bowing low.

At any other time Chélidoine would have curtsied and fluttered her eyelashes, for the fun of the thing.

He pointed with his cane at the official who followed him in, and said, "Stand over there, my good fellow."

Then he drew himself up and faced Chélidoine.

"Madame," he said, "I am the unhappy bearer of bad tidings. There has been committed a murder. Your husband, the citizen Rozérieulles, is no more. The concierge also is no more. I am the deputy Dupuytrait. I happened to be passing. Though not personally acquainted with the deceased, I had had the greatest admiration for his work, as had my good friend Fouquier-Tinville. Be assured, the sword of justice will avenge this cowardly deed. Madame, these are days when the most ardent patriot is he who has the most enemies. The proof of your husband's virtue, of his talents, of his courage, lies in the manner of his death. His name will . . ."

"I thank you, Monsieur, or rather citizen deputy. You will, perhaps, leave me now. There is much to do."

"Madame," said the deputy, and bowed, and walked out.

The official stepped forward.

"Now that the 'Monsieur and Madame' business is over," he said, "I will bring the doctor up here for the formalities. There is a death certificate. . . . I still do not understand where the citizen deputy found that key."

"Perhaps on my husband's person," said Chélidoine.

THE GASCON

" But it was not he who locked you in ? "

" Perhaps the murderer hid it on my husband's person before he fled."

" Ah. Yes."

Then he went out to bring the doctor to her.

" What will become of us, Madame ? " asked Babette.

" We shall remain for a few days, Babette, until that poor, unhappy man is laid in the earth, and then we shall leave Paris."

" And where shall we go, Madame ? "

" I do not know. I think we may go to the house of my godparents at Mesnil-Esnard. Alas, Babette, we are not men, and cannot follow the wars."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE QUEEN'S LAST HOPE

ON a stiflingly hot night in August, in the year 1793, a shabby young man, lean as a wolf, came out of a house in a narrow alley near the rue de la Bourbe. His furtive progress along the alley, as well as the secretive air of the dingy house he had left, would have aroused the suspicions of any police spy who might have happened to be in that neighbourhood. The man's face, though it retained something of its former handsomeness, was of that unhealthy pallor which is the result of lack of fresh air, and his wary look and his careful movements suggested that he was accustomed to live in the shadow of death. But there was no police spy to follow him, and nobody to suspect that old Mme. Gingault harboured in an attic the size of a large cupboard a young nobleman named Michel de Vaudrelaine, who was involved in a conspiracy to rescue the Queen of

THE QUEEN'S LAST HOPE

France from the Conciergerie prison. Mme. Gingault had once been a dressmaker, and had made dresses for Michel's mother, and since she took no interest in politics, nobody troubled her. She gave him food and shelter and what news she could pick up, and it was only after darkness had fallen that he ever ventured into the streets. Anyone meeting him would have taken him for some sickly shop-assistant.

Michel de Vaudrelaine went down the rue d'Enfer, past the church of St. Magloire, and turned into a wine-shop. Here, of an evening, he occasionally met another of the hunted, de Monicoux, now working as a stone-mason. Michel was drinking a glass of wine when he felt his sleeve plucked, and de Monicoux led him into a corner where they could talk. In this dark corner, two weeks before, de Monicoux had told him that the Queen had been transferred from the Temple to the Conciergerie, and that if she were ever to be rescued, it must be soon, since everybody knew that the transfer was the first step towards her trial, a trial that meant certain death. A week later de Monicoux was talking confidently of a rescue, but Michel was sceptical. "A rescue is utterly impossible," he had said.

"Why impossible?" asked de Monicoux. "De Batz would have rescued the King on the very journey to the guillotine, if his plan had not been betrayed to the police. He had his men ready, concealed along the route. He would have succeeded."

Michel had smiled at that. "The police to-day," he said, "are twice as vigilant. And we who would attempt anything, with such a life at stake, are too small in numbers. Even if the five hundred of de Batz had surrounded the King and got him away, they would never have gone beyond the barriers. It would be even more impossible now, with the Queen."

"But we are not leaving it so long this time," de Monicoux had replied. "We are going to rescue her while she is still

THE GASCON

in prison. The fellow Rougeville has it all planned. Every day he is meeting Michonis, the prison inspector."

"You are not going to tell me," said Michel, "that this Michonis is willing to risk his head to amuse us."

"Not exactly that," said de Monicoux. "This Rougeville is a sly dog. And Michonis, who is only a café-keeper after all, is mightily puffed up with his own importance. Rougeville gives him plenty to drink, and then, by some chance, the talk gets round to the Queen — nobody ever quite knows how. Rougeville is not in the least interested in her or her fate, but he is immensely impressed by the fact that he is at table with a man whose duty takes him to the Conciergerie, and into the very presence of the Queen almost every day. 'And you really see her face to face?' says Rougeville. 'Nothing in that,' says Michonis. 'What an interesting experience!' says Rougeville. Then one day Michonis says that he might be able to procure Rougeville a sight of her. But Rougeville is not sufficiently interested. Besides, it would get Michonis into trouble. Whereat the inspector becomes angry. 'Trouble! Ha! I would soon show them who was master. Why, you don't seem to realize that I have authority in all the prisons, and they do what I tell them.' But Rougeville can't believe this, and Michonis is determined to prove it. It begins to look as though Michonis is almost begging Rougeville to visit the Queen. Clever, isn't it?"

"Very clever," said Michel. "So far."

Michel had gone away from the meeting with his mind full of fantastic possibilities. He told himself that the whole idea was hopelessly impossible, but in spite of himself he gave way to his imagination. If one daring man could get into the Queen's presence . . .

And now, facing de Monicoux again in the wine-shop, he saw at once a new excitement in the eyes of his friend.

"It is all arranged," said de Monicoux.

"You mean——?"

THE QUEEN'S LAST HOPE

"I mean that all we need is good luck."

"Tell me what has occurred."

"Last night," said de Monicoux, "I was with Rougeville and Michonis at supper. Michonis is to take him to the prison this week. He will see the Queen. Later, when the inspector had gone, Rougeville told me the final arrangements. That visit will be a warning to the Queen to be ready."

"One moment," said Michel. "Why should Michonis do this? How could he explain his action to the authorities?"

"He is not unfavourable to us. He is moved by the misfortunes of the Queen."

"Suppose Michonis betrays us?"

"What is there to betray? He is not in the secret. All he knows is that Rougeville will see the Queen."

"But how can he communicate with her? Michonis will remain in the cell. And there are guards over her, day and night."

"Rougeville will offer her a little bunch of pinks, and concealed in them will be a note."

Michel looked at him incredulously.

"Oh, come now," he said, "my dear de Monicoux, this is too much! You are making a fool of me, with this ridiculous nonsense. Of course, the jailers won't think of searching a bunch of pinks, and if they forget to do that, they will avert their eyes while she reads the note, and possibly answers it. This is mere childishness."

"I said we needed good luck," replied de Monicoux. "With good luck the trick will succeed. You can trust the Queen to play her part cleverly."

"Well? After this?"

"Those jailers who are corruptible will be bribed."

"And how are we to know which to buy?"

"The Queen knows them by now. She will have the money to settle the matter."

THE GASCON

“ And then ? ”

“ On the night Rougeville appoints, the incorruptibles will be overpowered or otherwise put out of the way. A carriage will be waiting outside the prison. We have the carriage, and its driver. Outside the barrier there will be a cavalry escort. That has all been arranged. The Queen will be in Metz before the alarm spreads, and will then cross the frontier.”

“ You will need all your good luck,” said Michel, completely unconvinced.

“ You speak as though you had decided to have no part in the scheme.”

“ I would be in any scheme, however harebrained, that might serve the Queen in any way,” said Michel. “ My own life is valueless. I have no prospects — save arrest and the guillotine. But even if this were not so, I would join you. You know that my feelings for the Monarchy have not changed.”

His companion did not answer for a moment. Then he said : “ Michel, the other night Michonis told us about the Queen. She is in a little damp cell. Moisture trickles down the walls, and the bricks of the floor are never dry. It is always dark there, as the cell is beneath the level of the ground, and little light comes in through the one small, dirty window. She has a chair of sorts, and a camp-bed. She had a gold watch, which she used to hang on a nail above the bed, but they have taken it from her. On her table they allow her to have flowers, to solace her, and to sweeten the horrible air of the prison. Her hair, that beautiful hair of red-gold, is now white and uncared for, and because of the damp and the gloom she is losing the sight of one eye. She has frequent haemorrhages. She is never alone. Her two guards remain in the room with her. Between them and her is a small screen, not high enough to hide her unless she stoops. She suffers physically and mentally, without relief, but she is courteous

THE QUEEN'S LAST HOPE

with all, gentle in her words, and never for one instant forgets her dignity. She allows them to see as little of her suffering as is possible, and she makes no complaint of what she is forced to endure." There were tears in the young man's eyes as he spoke, and he clenched his fists and said : " Who would not die for her ? "

Then he lowered his voice and said pensively, " Michonis told us more. There is in the prison a little serving-maid named Rosalie, who is devoted to the Queen. The prisoners have no mirrors, but this Rosalie said to herself that when one is a Queen one is accustomed to many mirrors, since the act of dressing is not the careless and hasty and commonplace affair which it is to such people as serving-maids. It is a ceremony. And the dressing of the hair is also a ceremony. Therefore to be deprived of mirrors, which does not matter to others, is a serious loss for a queen. For Rosalie thought of Marie-Antoinette at Versailles, the queen of a fairy-tale, without a care in the world, young and beautiful and adored. She therefore went out on to the quays and bought for twenty-five sous a little mirror with a red border, and Chinese figures on it. It was not a mirror to offer a queen, but it was the best she could buy, and her shy offer of it was appreciated. Well, when Michonis stood at the cell door one day the Queen had not heard his approach. She was standing motionless, gazing into her mirror. Michonis saw the reflexion of her face, the reflexion of her sad and haggard face. He said that it made him think that she was seeing clearly for the first time what suffering had done to her, and was remembering that complexion which was unrivalled, and the brightness of the eyes and the lustre of the hair. Michonis said it was the face of an unhappy old woman. But, as he looked at the reflexion, unwilling to disturb her, she saw him behind her, and her body stiffened. The face reflected in the mirror changed so rapidly that he wondered if what he had seen was an illusion. For that

THE GASCON

look of lonely despair vanished, and in its place was pride and dignity. The face she turned to him as she left the mirror was still haggard, but it was not the face of a suffering old woman, but of a queen. She held her head high, as she waited to hear what he had to say, and Michonis said that if he had been a younger man and one less rubbed by the world, he would have knelt before her and asked for her commands."

"I am ashamed of my scepticism," said Michel. "What do the risks matter? She is doomed. Even our failure cannot increase her sufferings. They can do no more than ill-treat her and then kill her. My friend, can we really succeed?"

"We can," said de Monicoux firmly. "And we will."

"And my part in this?"

"You and I and twenty more are to be outside the prison on the night of the rescue. We shall be armed National Guards, and it will be our task to hold the prison as long as possible, against troops, police, deputies — against Fouquier-Tinville and Hébert, and the Devil himself. We buy time, time for her to reach safety."

In the last week of August the two young men met again. De Monicoux was in a buoyant mood.

"All goes well," he said.

"Tell me what has happened."

"The difficult first step has been taken. Rougeville has seen the Queen! Michonis took him to the cell. The two guards were in the room, playing cards, and there was a woman sewing there. Rougeville stood slightly behind and to the side of the inspector. Michonis began to talk pompously and the guards and the woman paid strict attention to him. Rougeville had the pinks in his buttonhole, but to offer them would have drawn too much attention to himself. So he raised his hand to his coat, indicating the flowers. The Queen saw the movement and understood, from the message of his eyes, that he was her friend and

THE QUEEN'S LAST HOPE

there to serve her. Then, while Michonis was talking to the woman about prison routine, and when the guards had lost interest in the visit, Rougeville took a pink from his buttonhole and threw it behind the little stove that was there by the wall. He then left the cell with Michonis and one of the guards. While Michonis was showing him the courtyard outside the Queen's cell, the other guard came to the barred window and transmitted to Michonis a request of his prisoner. Rougeville guessed that this was a trick of the Queen's. While the guard was standing with his back to the room, she would be reading the note, which told her that friends were working for her rescue and that if she required money for bribery it would be brought to her. Now do you believe in our success, Michel ? ”

“ It is a good beginning,” said Michel. “ But I say again, we shall need all our good luck.”

To Marie-Antoinette, whom all hope had abandoned, there returned suddenly the will to live. She had read the note behind her screen, and a wild impatience seized her. It was a natural reaction from the long days and nights of despondency. She had given up even pretending to herself that she might one day be free again. And now, so unexpectedly, so dramatically, freedom had become a possibility. Always of a lively temperament, and impulsive to a fault, she was not unable to conceal her feelings, or to play a part patiently and warily. The knowledge that her friends had not deserted her made her risk an act of utter folly. The note had told her that there was no lack of money for bribery, and it seemed to her that the sooner she started to prepare the way for escape the better. Acting on the spur of the moment, she dismissed the woman, asking her to bring a glass of water, and blurted out to the guard all that had occurred. “ Here,” she said, “ is my answer to that man who came to see me.” And she held out a piece

THE GASCON

of paper, on which she had pricked with a pin the words :
“ Je ne parle a personne Je suis gardée de vue je viendrai ”.

The amazed jailer said no word, but stared at her.

“ I will give this reply to him when he comes again,” she said. And at that moment the woman came in with the glass of water, and the jailer stretched out his hand and took the Queen’s reply to Rougeville’s note. Not quite certain what his attitude was, unable to talk of the matter in front of the woman, the Queen let him take the piece of paper, and he went out.

When the first excitement of Rougeville’s visit and all that it meant to her had given way to a calmer appreciation of her position, the Queen began to be tortured by doubt. Was the jailer, who now had the means of betraying her and her friends, willing to be an accomplice ? Or was he to be accounted an enemy ? When she cross-questioned him he made light of the matter. Richard, the concierge, he said, had taken the paper, but there was nothing to fear. She tried to persuade herself that his vague attitude was merely a bit of acting for the benefit of the other jailer. For several days she remained in suspense, always hoping for another visit from Rougeville. But nobody came — until one day at the beginning of September she heard the sound of feet in the corridor outside her cell, and her heart bounded in her throat. The door opened, and there entered six policemen, who informed her that officials from the Committee of General Security were waiting to interrogate her in another room of the prison.

For several nights Michel de Vaudrelaine went in vain to the wine-shop. There was no sign of de Monicoux. Then one evening he saw him come in, crestfallen, and with burning, sleepless eyes.

“ It is all finished,” he said. “ Somebody has betrayed us. Rougeville has disappeared without a word. Michonis has been questioned, des Achaux tells me. The net will

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

soon be over us all. I am going to-night."

"Going whither?"

"My dear friend, what does it matter where we go? But not too far away. Something might be done even now, before it is too late. And you?"

"I care as little as you what becomes of me now. I think I shall make my way over the frontier. Whatever can be done now will be done by force of arms. Coburg can use a sword or two, I dare say."

The two young men said good-bye to each other that night, and Michel returned for the last time to his attic, where he made a bundle of his few possessions. Then, armed with his passport, which showed that he was Henri Labat, he left Paris in the early light of the next morning, by the Clichy barrier, and trudged unhappily along a road of which he saw nothing; the exile's road trodden by so many of his friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES, AND AGAIN HEARS THE SONG

FÉLICIEN stood ankle-deep in mud and listened to the grumbling and cursing of his men. They had fought all the previous day, and then had retreated to the place from which they had set out. Félicien had no idea of the date, nor of the result of the battle in which he had fought. Perhaps there had been no result. All he knew was that he was somewhere on the French frontier, attempting to relieve Maubeuge; that he was on the left wing, commanded by a general whose name was unknown to him; and that the commander-in-chief was a draper, who had been a private soldier only three years ago. He had also heard a

THE GASCON

rumour that Carnot himself was somewhere in the neighbourhood, wherever headquarters might be.

After a day's fighting and the retreat, lacking further orders, he had told his hungry, ill-clothed, exhausted men to lie down and rest until orders came. The camping ground was a sodden field which became marsh-land at its western edge, where a swollen streamlet twisted to right and left. Across this streamlet there was a wooden foot-bridge which quickly became fuel for a bivouac fire. An enterprising band of comrades had found a small hamlet under a hill, and had stolen three chickens and some bread. But before the wet wood could be kindled orders came. They were to make a forced march eastwards through the night. Some said they were running away from the Austrian cavalry again, others that some clever swine had a cunning tactical ruse, which was to march them to death, and so end the war at a stroke. But a tall sergeant said: "Be thankful, my little ones, that you are not in the cavalry, with horses to manage, or in the artillery, with guns to haul. You have only your miserable bodies to look after and, judging by the look of them, they wouldn't fetch twopence at the Fécamp horse-fair."

Félicien stood in the mud and listened. He had not eaten for sixteen hours, nor slept for twenty-four. He was interested to discover how much of war is hunger and fatigue, cold rain and mud, and how little of it is exaltation; also how meaningless are the movements of troops to anybody who is not in a position to see the battle as a whole. He sympathized with the cursing of his men, driven hither and thither like animals, to carry out schemes of which they knew nothing. Only for a few moments had Félicien been uplifted. That was when he had seen the Revolution in action. He had heard no singing, no rhetoric. But a young general had pointed with his sword towards a sunken lane, and had shouted: "Forward, Frenchmen!" And there had been a hacking and cutting-down of Hungarians

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

by men wild with rage. They had not, Félicien was certain, any thought of the Revolution; their enthusiasm was for France invaded, and their ambition to throw back their country's enemies. But he knew that it was the Revolution which had brought to them a new idea of France, as a patrimony in which they for the first time had a share. For they were the first citizen army.

They marched in the rain eastwards, by flooded lanes and marshy fields, fording streams, scrambling up heathy slopes, pushing through dripping woods. They swore and blasphemed and ranted as they went, their ragged shirts clinging to their wet bodies, their broken boots squelching mud and water, their dirty pale faces seamed with runnels of sweat and rain. And all the time Félicien could hear the tall sergeant saying: "That is the way, my little ones! Come, now! Curse me the army for an abominable trade. He who stops swearing remembers his fatigue. What! Baudot! Do you call that blasphemy? Come, man, that wouldn't even shock a young seminarist. There's many a Cardinal could do better than that! . . ." "The officer is very silent," shouted a deep voice. "My friend," said Félicien, "I do my cursing under my breath. It saves energy and is a greater comfort to the soul." They passed a gun sunk deep to the axles in greasy mud. The gunners were tugging and grunting at the end of stout ropes. "Good evening, girls of the infantry!" shouted one of them. "A pleasant walk to you!" "This Carnot," cried another, "must be a great strategist. He's bursting with plans for us." Other voices joined in.

"If ever anybody is good enough to tell me the name of our gallant general, I will get my old mother to put up a candle for him in the church at home. He will need all the prayers he can get."

"Why can't they leave us to fight, instead of thinking of great movements and marching us about like a lot of sheep?"

THE GASCON

"Tell me this, Soufflens, are we advancing or retreating?"

"It is all one, my old comrade; if we are retreating we shall soon have the cavalry at our backs again. If we are advancing we shall have them in our faces. It is my opinion that we are passing the time until our generals have thought out something new to do with us."

"It's the politicians in Paris, I tell you. Some deputy says, 'Pardon me, Committee of Public Safety, but do you see that fine regiment of men about to snatch an hour's sleep after fighting forty thousand foreigners for three days and nights, and nothing to eat or drink? Well, kindly send them off again on their travels, the lazy rascals.' Then citizen Robespierre, who knows all about war, gives the order, and here we are."

"It appears to me that we are perhaps invading Belgium by a back way."

"Ho! We are outwitting everybody to-night."

"Especially our generals, who meant to tell us to march the other way. It is too bad!"

"It took a Revolution to get me into this mess."

So they went, floundering and splashing through the sodden autumn night. And some there were who dreamed of home, and some few of glory, but the majority of them took what came like beasts of burden, preferring, all the same, to die fighting than to let in the foreigner. They were lumbering along a lane when a horseman, all mud from head to foot, came riding across country, and delivered an order to the captain at the head of the column.

"Orders to march back to where we came from, I will wager," said somebody.

On they went, soaked to the skin, cold, hungry. Youngsters staggered as they walked, half asleep. Older men let out great volleys of terrible oaths. Félicien wondered what history would say of this business in which he was engaged. He thought also, and with dread, of a possible encounter

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

with his own countrymen and his own kind. Not far away in the darkness — in what direction he knew not — were French noblemen, friends of his own, friends of his boyhood. He wondered what they would say when it came to riding down these half-starved soldiers of their own blood.

They were crossing a soggy field when the order came to break the ranks. The men sat down and sprawled in the mud. Word came back that no fires were to be lit, and that the men were to be silent. Félicien was summoned to a group of officers. He was told that in ten minutes his men must stand to arms. He said they were exhausted. "They must be kicked awake," he was told. Three columns were to attack a hill some few kilometres distant. Félicien was to be with the centre column. The orders were to march rapidly and as quietly as possible straight for the hill, which would be visible at dawn. The start would be made before dawn. The affair was to be settled by the bayonet. It was to be a surprise attack. As Félicien went back to his men he could hear the stirring of a host all about him in the fields and ditches and lanes. No light showed. Here and there men were sleeping in the mud. Others sat disconsolately, talking in low voices, or staring into the darkness.

When dawn broke Félicien could not see twenty yards into the thick mist. The men had stood to arms, and were chafing their hands, and stamping their feet to keep the cold out. Their attitude was the attitude of men who have been driven to breaking-point and can do no more. Their heads hung down, their eyes were angry or hopeless, their shoulders were rounded. When the order to move came, they shuffled along, and Félicien told himself that men in such condition could not be expected to fight. Nobody who could have seen them now and knew what they had endured would issue an order to advance. Some headstrong young general, probably a provincial ironmonger a few weeks ago, must have taken matters in hand, regardless

THE GASCON

of the human material which was to put his ideas into execution.

The ground began to slope upwards. They slithered and slipped. Félicien found a rough track and led his men along it. Full daylight had come, but the wet mist lay across the landscape. Then there were exclamations. Sheds and byres were visible above, on a spur of high ground. Behind the advancing men the guns began to thunder. The pace increased, and a new excitement roused the weary men from their apathy. Whatever was to be met would be met soon. They gripped their muskets more tightly, happy to think that with the bayonet it is all over quickly, one way or the other. From somewhere to the right came the call of a bugle. It was taken up all along the line, and the men began to scramble faster and faster up the hillside. Far ahead other bugles were sounding the charge and the vanguard was already at grips with the enemy. Félicien found himself shouting. It appeared to him that his regiment, and no other, was at the critical point of the attack, and that it might lose or win the battle by its own exertions. He saw the white uniforms of the Croats. They were retreating through a farmyard. "There they are!" he yelled, and there was an answering shout from the men behind him. He could hear now the screams and groans of wounded men, and as he ran forward he had to jump over bodies. The farmyard was empty by the time they reached it, but in front, to right, and to left, there was the clash of conflict. While they rested to get their breath, leaning against gates and shed-walls, the tall sergeant said: "There is nothing like a bayonet charge to wake a man up."

Masses of men were coming on to the hill from every direction. Félicien's orders had been to go straight ahead, and find the enemy and exterminate him. He led his men on again, down a village street, and at the end of the street there was a barricade. Félicien gave the word to charge, and was surprised that the enemy behind the farm wagons

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

and tables and chairs and tree-trunks held their fire so long. That required a cool nerve. They must be veteran troops, well trained. They were now thirty yards away . . . twenty-five . . . twenty . . . fifteen . . . ten. The crashing volley which he expected never came. The barricade was carried — but there was nobody behind it. Once more the men halted to recover breath.

“Are we fighting ghosts then?” asked a pallid, lanky youth.

The sergeant pointed to two dead Frenchmen by the side of a door in the village street. There were others further on.

“Others have been here before us,” said the sergeant.

“Chasing a battle, that’s what we are doing.”

Away on the left there was a burst of cheering. Félicien led his men on again, and they came under fire for the first time that day as they were passing a tall, respectable-looking, grey house. The house was quickly surrounded, and Félicien, followed by a crowd of infantrymen, dashed in. He was engaged with an Austrian on the stairs when a man leaned over the banister above him and dropped a weighty pot. The pot broke on his head and inflicted a deep gash between his eyes. He staggered back into the arms of the tall sergeant and lost consciousness.

When he came to his senses he was lying on his cloak in the wet heather, some little way from the village. All about him were men of various regiments, some wounded, some asleep, others sitting patiently. He called to a doctor and blinked up at him from beneath the bandages round his head.

“What is the news?” he asked.

The doctor rose from beside the man he had been attending.

“The Austrian cavalry have cut our men to pieces,” he said.

“Another retreat, then?” asked Félicien.

THE GASCON

"If there's anyone left to retreat."

Félicien closed his eyes and lay back in the heather. What could anybody have expected? How could untrained men be expected to fight all day and march all night and fight all day again, without food or sleep? They had done far more than any trained soldier could be expected to do. Yet he was bitterly unhappy, and humiliated.

"I do not believe it."

At the sound of the voice Félicien sat up and looked to his right. He saw a young giant in peasant clothes, but with a musket between his knees. His left arm, from elbow to wrist, was swathed in bandages.

"What does a doctor know about it?" said the peasant. "He only sees the dead and the dying. I saw the cavalry charge, and I got this to remember it by. But I remained where I fell long enough to see the Austrians charge the other way — and the damned traitor Frenchmen, too, on their fine horses. It's my opinion that we beat them."

"What did you see?" asked Félicien.

The peasant grinned.

"Oh, I saw a sight I shall never see again. I saw them come hard at us, and I knew them by their uniform for our gallant fellow countrymen — and by the great white banner that was carried by the noble gentlemen. I'd seen that flag at a review of the Royal-Bourbon at Courbevoie. They were as finely dressed as in the old days, for no doubt their masters pay them well to kill us. My stomach turned upside-down with rage, and I nearly vomited. They bore down on us, and one noble gentleman tried to cut my arm off. I rolled myself clear of their horses, and wished in my misery that I'd been killed. But as I lay listening to the din, I noticed that it was coming nearer again. I sat up, and there were my lords the noble gentlemen all knocked to bits and returning to their masters to have their wounds dressed. I will admit they were not a rout. Oh, no. They rode back to collect their pay in good order, so much for

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

every poor Frenchman killed to please the Austrians. And behind them, in a great solid wedge, to make sure that the noble gentlemen did not turn again, came our men, roaring that song, and generals, and a man they said was Darnot of the Committee or whatever his name is, ahead of them, with his hat on the point of his sword. They——”

“What was the song they were singing?” asked Félicien. But he knew the answer.

“Singing?” said the peasant. “Why, that wasn’t singing, my friend. It was more like a thunderstorm. It was that song they call the ‘Marseillaise’. The generals were singing it, too, and I wish to God I had been there singing it with them. I tell you, I believe we have won a battle.”

“They may have captured Maubeuge,” said Félicien.

“Oh, undoubtedly,” replied the peasant. “Maubeuge is only just up the road there. You would see it from that little rise of ground ahead.”

“You know this country well?”

“It is my own country.”

“And what is that village we came through, on the hill there?”

“That is my village — Wattignies. I seized a musket this morning from a dead man, and made myself a soldier — and here I am. I might have been a general by to-morrow, if what people say about promotion is true. It’s the devil being wounded.”

“I agree with you,” said Félicien.

“Listen!” said the peasant.

Far away voices were roaring the battle-song of the Republic and, as Félicien listened, he knew that there had been a victory. And as he thought of the faces of his men, and marvelled at what they had accomplished, he struggled to his feet and stood dizzily looking out towards the horizon. A horseman brought news, and meanwhile the voices were coming nearer, and some of the wounded were joining in

THE GASCON

the singing. The doctor approached Félicien.

"I was wrong," he said. "It was our victory. Maubeuge is saved. We march in to-morrow."

Félicien did not answer, because he could not speak. There were tears in his eyes, and the doctor looked at him curiously, and with deep interest, when he began to bawl with all the power of his lungs the words of that immortal song.

From the woods, which stretched in a horseshoe formation across the Avesnes-Maubeuge road, straggling lines of men were emerging. No order for pursuit had been given, because the troops were at the extreme of exhaustion. Many lay down and slept beside the road, others formed into groups and dozed, or talked of the day. One such group halted near the wounded, and Félicien watched them. There was a loud-voiced youngster amongst them who was entertaining his comrades with a story of what had occurred in his particular sector of the attack.

"We had to clear a bit of wood back there," he said, "to get astride the road. Legouvé was full of stratagems, like all the bastards from his part — he's from the Fasné. We were so tired we could hardly stand, and what would have suited us was a great charge with the bayonet, and an end of the thing one way or the other. But this Legouvé had his accursed plans, which he explained slowly, like a notary. There were not many of the Austrians there, but they were clinging to the edge of the wood, and Legouvé's idea was to retreat silently through the trees, and then make a great circular sweeping movement, so as to come up on their rear and surprise them. We were just about to carry out this idea of his — and we'd still be marching now if it had ever come to anything — when there appeared in our rear, walking along a path, the oddest sight you ever saw. He was a big red-haired fellow without a hat and carrying his sword in his hand. His belt and scabbard were gone, and his clothes were torn like a beggar's, and

FÉLICIEN FIGHTS AT WATTIGNIES

his face black with powder. He was a young chap, but he had a fine red moustache, and when he saw us he waved his sword and grinned, and he shouted : ' Flamberge au Vent ! That is my family motto. And what's the use of a scabbard when you're at war ? ' When he saw what was toward, he said, ' Ah, I feared that the fighting was over for to-day, but it seems I am in the nick of time. I've lost my men and they've lost me in the general rough-and-tumble round Dourlers.' Legouv   said sulkily, ' If you want more fighting you're welcome to join us.' Whereat red-head says : ' I didn't join the army to play cards. But who or what is there left to attack ? I thought I had routed them all. Have I been guilty of an oversight ? ' ' You have,' says Legouv  , who doesn't like this wild talk. And then he explained once more his master-plan. And before he'd finished speaking, up bobs the red-head again and, says he : ' Oh, no, no, no, no. Your pardon, but that will never do. They're only Austrians, not Frenchmen, and we're all tired out, and the sooner we finish with them the better.' ' Perhaps you, sir, have a better plan ? ' says Legouv   sarcastically. ' Of course I have,' says the red-head. ' First of all,' says he, ' half of us go back a little way very quietly into the wood, only a few hundred yards. That party then advances again as noisily as possible, giving the impression of a powerful reinforcement. We here hail them loudly with shouts of welcome, and both parties make as much of a clatter and rattle as possible. Then, when these insects at the edge of the wood are beginning to consider retreat, we come at them.' Legouv   didn't like the idea, but he saw that we all liked it, if only because it would settle the thing quickly, and without any more marching. So red-head's idea was adopted. Back went the party through the wood, very carefully and quietly. And then, after about five minutes, there breaks out such a commotion as you never heard, as though six regiments, with guns too, were crashing through the wood. Our

THE GASCON

party, which had stayed with Legouv  , began to yell greetings, and soon the whole wood seemed to be filled with shouting men and clattering muskets. We had spread out a bit, so that, from our cries, anyone would have thought we were double and treble our numbers. By now, it seemed to be agreed without any words that the red-head was in command, and Legouv   made no attempt to interfere. When the second party had joined us we got into line, still making a noise, and then we began to advance, and then Robisque, the little drummer who was with us, beat the *pas de charge*, and old Mouenne blew his bugle, and we rushed those Austrians, all of us shouting like madmen, and the red-head on in front, roaring louder than anybody and running like a hare. The Austrians took to their heels and we were too tired to pursue them. We had cleared them from the wood and were now astride the road. But the red-head, he is at their heels like all the devils out of hell, and one or two in the rear turned to hold him off, and we saw him slashing with his sword, and then he went out of sight in a little hollow."

"I think I know that man," said F  licien with a smile. "Wasn't he called Birros? Armand Birros?"

"That was the name," said the youngster. "When Legouv   tried to argue with him, he said, 'I am Armand Birros,' as though that settled the matter."

"From what I know of him, it probably did settle the matter," said F  licien. "But what became of him?"

"If they had any sense they took him prisoner," said the youngster. "I never saw a man run so fast. We couldn't get anywhere near him."

"I think he'll turn up again," said F  licien.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LOVERS' MEETING

To the tavern where Birros had bade farewell to Chélidoine there came, in the last week of October 1793, a letter for Mme. Rozérieulles, and from there it was despatched to the house of the postmaster, her godfather, at Mesnil-Esnard. Thither she had come after the death of her husband. She read it in her room by candlelight that evening. It said :

CHÉLIDOINE, MY RINGDOVE,

There has been a battle, which I am glad to say I won. We are now in Maubeuge. I surrounded it single-handed, and as a reward the Committee of Public Safety and General Jourdan, both of whom supported me as well as they could in the campaign, will not guillotine me if I absent myself from the Army for a short while, in order to prepare myself for the conquest of the Low Countries. And since you told me to apply to you, my bewitching little rascal, if I needed any more false noses, I find it necessary to see you, since I am ordered to supply the entire Army of the North with that useful article. I write to the tavern to which you took me for our interrupted honeymoon, which is the only address you gave me. Send word to the Auberge Ste Aldegarde by the Bavai Gate, telling me where I may have the honour of paying my respects to you in the heartiest fashion I know. It is, my enchantress, only the fact that you are a married woman which prevents me from saying that I look forward to covering you with kisses. I have no time for more, as forty Generals are waiting on me to know my wishes. Lose no time in replying to this. I adore you.

CAMUS.

Some days later the reply reached the inn at the Bavai Gate.

INSUFFERABLE CAMUS,

Your news was stale. Your victory was announced, and has been in the newspapers, and when I read that one man

THE GASCON

unaided had routed the Austrians, I of course knew it was you. I am at present at Mesnil-Esnard, with my godparents, and shall be glad to receive you, and to hear the story of your exploits, so vastly exaggerated by common report and in the Convention, told in your own shrinking and modest manner. It is, my Camus, only the fact that I am now a widow which permits me to say that I look forward to being covered with kisses.

CHÉLIDOINE.

In the garden at Mesnil-Esnard was a kind of sheltered walk, and there Birros heard from the lady the story of what had happened since he left her. The pale November sunshine still had a little warmth in it, and they went slowly between the trim hedges.

"I could be happy in such a garden as this, with my children about me," said Chélidoine. "But you" — and she smiled gaily at him — "you, I think, would wish to turn it into a duelling ground. Disturbances follow you, my Camus, and you were born to live in a perpetual turmoil. You should marry a bandit-woman, who would brawl. How did you come to love a woman like me?"

"Ventreguienne!" cried Birros. "You little know what a deep well of tenderness there is in my heart. It is my infernal happiness and my good health that make me seem to be lacking in sensibility. Ha! With you I could become sentimental, and weep for a broken flower."

He looked so comical as he said this in his strident voice and with an irrelevant swagger, that she burst into laughter.

"Do not try to change yourself," she said. "I love you as you are, and maybe advancing years will cool your blood, whether you or I like it or no."

"You shall have your garden," said Birros. "What do men know of gardens who have not seen my valley? The beautiful valley of Aspe. I tell you that on the broad plain where my valley's wide gates face all France, you tread the floor of Paradise. Enter those gates and climb between the narrowing hills, and you come to a jasse, an

LOVERS' MEETING

upland pasture, where you have the great Pyrenees behind you, and the happy foothills before you. There will our home be, and there you shall have your garden. There we will rear an enormous brood of children, and I shall come home from the wars, loaded with glory."

"Will you be a general, Camus?"

"I shall be a general, or whatever is higher than a general. Is not Jourdan, the pedlar, a general? And I knew more of fighting when I was a lad of sixteen than ever he will know if he lives to be a hundred. These are golden days for the fighting man."

"But not so golden for the fighting man's wife."

"You, Chélidoine, were born to be a soldier's wife. Or would you have me go and bury myself in parchments like any bloodless notary, so that at the end of fifty years of toil I could boast that I had read some four million and eighty words, and written my fingers into a palsy? Or maybe you would have me a deputy, to sit all day and all night in their stinking lair in Paris, earning my right, by contradicting the weakest faction, to serve on a committee. No. You are one of those women with humour enough to enjoy glory without worshipping it, and when you see me in my general's uniform, you will say to the neighbours: 'That's the man for me, and the Devil take your mumbling prigs of husbands.'"

"And if the husbands resent my words and my tone, I shall, of course, cry: 'Enough! Or must I ask the general to slit your skinny throats?'"

"Excellent," roared Birros. "We are in tune, my wood-pigeon. You know my inner mind. We shall go far together. No wonder I love you so."

A quiet voice here interrupted the love-scene. A good-natured man of middle age was contemplating them.

"You would make a better town-crier than a lover, citizen," he said.

"And who the Devil may you be?" asked Birros,

THE GASCON

advancing menacingly towards him.

"Gently, gently," said Chélidoine. "This is my godfather."

"I must apologize for my intrusion," said the newcomer.

"Doubtless," said Chélidoine, "the ardent whispers of my lover aroused you — and the whole village. He is in one of his tender moods. You should see him when he is feeling more robust."

"Godfather," said Birros, "I was born to be mocked, but I am an easy-going man. This lady brings out the worst in me, I fear."

"I had an excuse for my intrusion," said the postmaster. "They say that lovers lose their appetites. But, to tempt you, my wife has a couple of fowls on the spit, and——"

Birros was about to answer, but Chélidoine spoke first. She took his arm and looked up at him anxiously.

"Alas!" she said, "I am afraid he is too deeply in love to think of food. I doubt if I can coax him to taste a morsel. Camus, dear Camus, you must keep up your strength. You will pine away. Could you not take a mouthful of fowl? And perhaps a glass of wine?"

"Now you mention it," said Birros, "I believe it would do me good. I am very low." Then, with a great laugh, he picked Chélidoine up in his arms. "Godfather," he said, "there was never such a girl as this. She will end by curing me of my melancholy; my accursed gloomy temperament is no weapon against her gaiety. Ventre——"

"—guienne!" cried Chélidoine so loudly that her godfather swung round and stared at her, and her godmother, in the kitchen, dropped the spoon with which she was basting the fowls.

THE END

